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ANGRON'S MONOLITH

STEVE LYONS



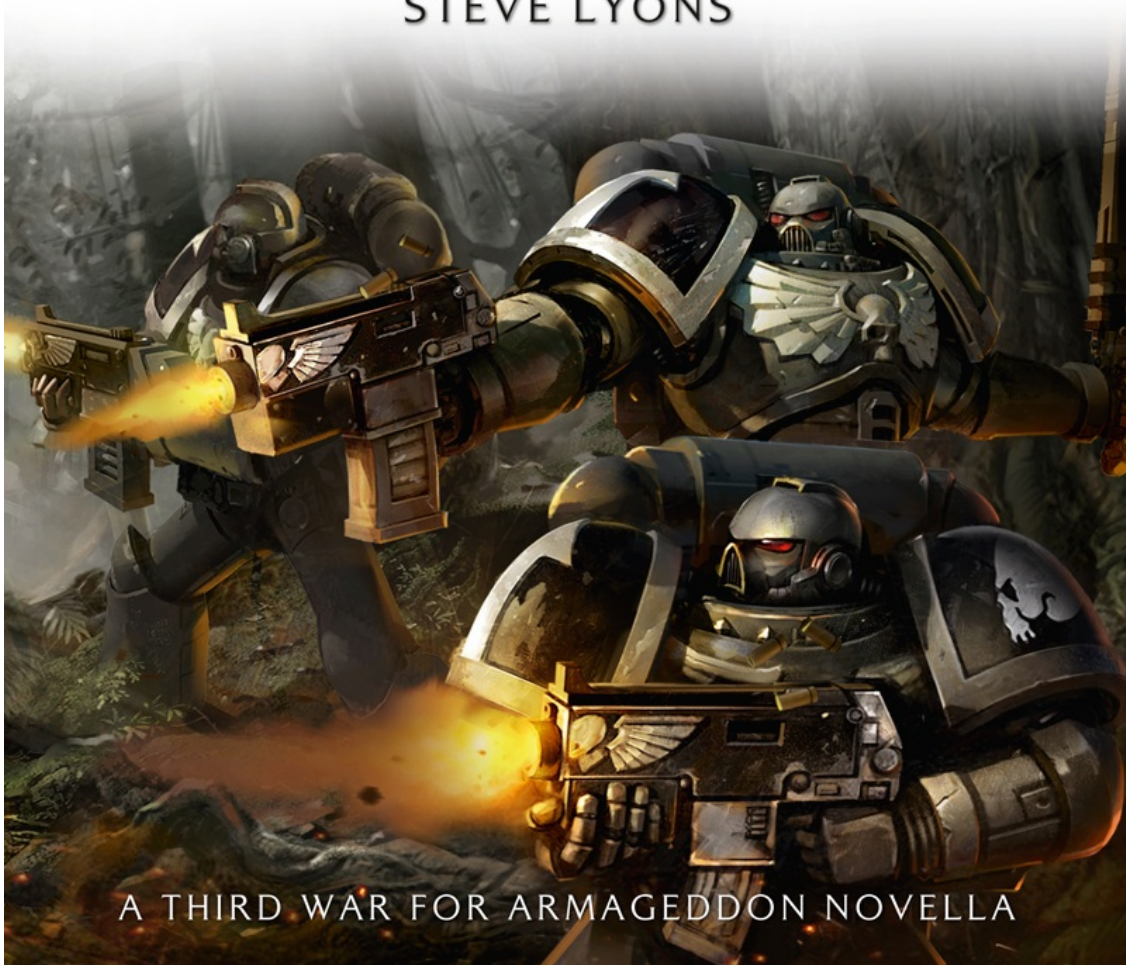
A THIRD WAR FOR ARMAGEDDON NOVELLA

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It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

Priority level: Magenta Alpha

Transmitted: Sky fortress of the Relictors Chapter

To: Adeptus Astartes battle-barge *Blade of Vengeance*, Armageddon
High Orbit

Date: 3812998.M41

Transmitter: Astropath Prime Magwen

Receiver: Astropath-terminus Xhian-Ji

Author: Chapter Master Artekus Bardane

Thought for the Day: Ignorance is blessed.

Attention: Lord Commander Dante. Your communiqué has been received and understood. I have suspended all current operations and am hastening to join you. This affront to the Emperor will not be allowed to stand! The entire might of my Chapter will be brought to bear against the ork defilers. Praise be to the Emperor.



ONE

The last of the orks tried to run.

The tangled jungle floor snagged its foot and brought it crashing down. The impact snapped its primitive spear in two; the stone head had been blunted against its enemies' armour anyway.

Tarryn reached the outmatched creature in three assured strides. Even prone, even helpless, it spat and kicked at him and mouthed a stream of obscenities, which he couldn't hear over the roar of his chainsword. Like its fellows – all dead now – it had painted its face with red jungle dyes in hectic, swirling patterns.

Tarryn did his duty, as he had done many times before. With a sweep of his blade, he parted the ork's head from its shoulders.

'We could be doing more,' grumbled Baeloch.

The Relictors had formed up into a five-strong arc again. They marched on, heading ever deeper into the twisted jungle. They made no attempt at stealth. They could hardly have stood out more starkly from their surroundings had they tried.

The armoured shells that encased them, with their symmetrical greys and blacks and machine-smoothed edges, made for a sharp contrast with the brash greens, purples, oranges and browns that painted random patterns around them.

The Season of Fire was approaching on Armageddon and the temperature had been rising steadily for days. The Relictors kept their helmets sealed because the

air was swarming with disease-carrying insects and toxic spores.

‘We have killed scores of greenskins today,’ said Tarryn.

‘None of them combatants in the war,’ argued Baeloch. ‘Our efforts today are unlikely to have altered its course. Nor will they alter it tomorrow, I fear.’

He was marching at one end of the arc, to Tarryn’s left. To his right, Sergeant Juster led the combat squad from its apex. Tarryn wondered if he was close enough to have heard his battle-brother’s mutterings. *Most likely not*, he supposed.

The jungle was forced to give way to their belligerent presence. Sprawling branches broke against their ceramite plastrons. Wild plants were steamrolled beneath their armoured weight. Creepers clung to them and tried to hold them back, but were wrenched inexorably from their roots. The Relictors were cutting a wide, straight swathe through the tangled foliage, enforcing a semblance of order upon this realm where chaos, of a natural sort, had long held sway.

Tarryn was uncomfortably warm. His auto-senses informed him that his body temperature was optimal, but the pores in his skin were itching.

Baeloch was right about one thing. The jungle orks were different from the greenskins he had encountered before. They were just as tough and belligerent as any of their kind, but wilder, perhaps less intelligent and certainly less organised. They had not arrived with Warlord Ghazghkull’s invasion force. Rather, they were the remnants of a previous ork incursion onto this world.

The Second War for Armageddon had ended over fifty years ago, in a glorious victory for the Emperor’s loyal forces. The invaders, however, had left their spores behind, and many of them had fallen on fertile ground.

The jungle orks – *feral orks*, the Librarians called them – had sprouted from those scattered spores: a primitive offshoot of the species, armed and armoured with only what they had been able to scavenge or scratch-build for themselves. They had developed a language, but it was rudimentary at best, little more than a series of guttural grunts and snarls.

The threat they posed, compared with that of their space-faring cousins, was relatively minor – or would have been, were it not for their extraordinary numbers. The jungle was riddled with them. Some days, it seemed like Tarryn and his squad could hardly take ten steps without disturbing another nest of them.

It often felt as if for every feral ork they killed, another five immediately sprang up from the soil to replace it.

‘I’m detecting movement ahead of us,’ said Brother Nabori over the vox-link.

‘I hear it,’ confirmed Brother Kantus. ‘Sounds like a lone creature, and a small one. Insufficient body mass for an ork. It could be another squig.’

The Relictors came to a halt, outwardly silent. Tarryn felt for the grip of his boltgun. He could just about discern the sombre shades of Kantus’s armour to Sergeant Juster’s right. Nabori, beyond him at the far end of the arc, he couldn’t see. Too much of the plant life between them had rebounded from their passing.

‘The target just cut across my path,’ said Nabori. ‘Coming your way, Kantus.’

‘Report as soon as you have eyes on it,’ Juster ordered.

‘I see it,’ said Kantus. He corrected himself: ‘I see him. It’s a man.’

The Relictors had already lurched into motion, converging swiftly upon their brother’s position. Juster and Nabori were the closest – and well placed to flank the unseen threat – but Tarryn and Baeloch didn’t need to be told to follow them.

‘I want him taken alive,’ said Juster.

By the time Tarryn had caught up with the others, it was over.

‘He came at me.’ Kantus was speaking aloud now, through the vox-grille in his helmet. ‘He was in a blind fury, tried to barge me out of his way. You can probably make out the imprint of eagle wings on his face. He broke his shoulder.’

A man lay in the trampled undergrowth at the Relictor’s feet. He was filthy, his clothes rags, clinging to an emaciated body. The man’s hair reached to his waist, grey, straggly and knotted, with an unkempt beard to match. He was clutching a hand to his shoulder and moaning in pain.

Juster rolled him over with his toe. The man landed on his back, and the remnants of his torn shirt flapped open. It was at that moment that Tarryn lost any sympathy he might have felt for him.

A rune had been daubed on the man’s chest, in the same red dye that the feral orks often used. It was crude, unskilfully painted, and yet each of the five Space Marines looking at it knew what it was meant to represent.

There was no mistaking the highly stylised skull symbol of the most savage of the Ruinous Powers: the God of Blood, War and Murder.

Tarryn felt his blood rising at the sight of it, and knew that Baeloch felt the same because he stiffened and instinctively brought his bolter to bear. Sergeant Juster stayed his hand. ‘I said I want him alive.’ Baeloch didn’t question the order; nor, however, did he choose to lower his weapon.

Juster’s toe nudged the man in the ribs again. His moans had subsided. His eyes snapped open, round and white, his pupils shrinking. He parted his cracked

lips and tried to speak, but the effort almost choked him. The words he managed to expel from his throat were disjointed and mostly incoherent.

‘Where have you come from?’ demanded Juster, but the man couldn’t or wouldn’t answer him. His mouth filled up and overflowed with the froth of madness.

‘Are there any more of you in the jungle? Where are you based?’

‘Sergeant,’ Tarryn interrupted him. He was looking at the tatters of the man’s clothing. The coat, he had realised, had once been mustard yellow, worn over a set of black fatigues. He had lost one boot and the seams of the other had split.

‘He’s Imperial Guard,’ said Tarryn, and now he felt more contemptuous than angry, that a soldier of the Emperor should have been reduced to this.

Kantus had seen it too. ‘Steel Legion. Must be operating out of Cerbera Base.’

‘That’s a long way north,’ said Baeloch. ‘The other side of the jungle, practically. How did he end up here?’

Sergeant Juster stooped over their dishevelled prisoner. ‘What was your mission, Guardsman?’ he barked in the man’s face, amplifying his voice. ‘What happened to the rest of your unit? In the name of the Emperor, answer me!’

The Guardsman’s eyes narrowed and, forgetting his injured shoulder, he seized Juster’s throat with both hands. He couldn’t hurt him, of course, but he clung to the sergeant’s gorget with unnatural strength all the same, until his fingers were prised from it one by one and he slumped into the dirt again.

‘He must have been lost, wandering in the jungle for months – years, perhaps,’ Tarryn mused. The Guardsman had lost his lasgun and every piece of equipment he had been issued with, along with his sanity.

He had found his voice, though, as if his throat had been uncorked, and he was babbling about something. Tarryn couldn’t make out what it was. Something he had encountered in the jungle. Some manner of mutant? A face, or many faces, their eyes glaring at him with tangible hatred. ‘Couldn’t escape from it... Ran as far as I could... I kept running, but it was always there again in front of me... waiting for me...’

‘Where is it?’ demanded Juster. ‘Where is this horror?’

With an effort that wracked his wasted form, the Guardsman lifted a quivering finger. He pointed over Sergeant Juster’s shoulder, towards the east. However, he then brought the finger around and pointed north, back the way the Relictors had come. He pointed southwards next, to where the jungle was deepest and darkest and as yet unexplored, and finally westwards, past Brothers Nabori and Kantus.

Baeloch found he could hold his tongue no longer. ‘Sergeant!’ he protested.

The Guardsman's eyes clouded over, and he began to recite a blasphemous prayer. The words that spewed from his mouth were loud and clear enough now, and offensive to the Relictors' ears. Juster glanced up at Baeloch and nodded curtly.

Brother Baeloch didn't hesitate to shoot the mad Guardsman in the head.

They stood in silence, as the shadows around them lengthened.

In the jungle, night fell quickly. It kept the sweltering heat of the daytime trapped beneath its canopy, however.

'Most likely, he saw nothing,' said Baeloch finally. 'His mind was broken.'

'Perhaps,' agreed Juster. He glanced up at the darkening sky and made a decision. 'Perhaps not. We should investigate, at least.'

They formed up into their arc again, the same positions as before; but this time, they varied their heading by seventy degrees. They set off in the direction from which the mad Guardsman had come stumbling.

'We're wasting our time with this,' Baeloch muttered, again too softly for anyone but Tarryn to hear him. 'We could be doing more.'

Baeloch was a more experienced warrior than Tarryn. It was certainly no secret that he felt he ought to have made sergeant by now. Still, Tarryn felt uncomfortable when his battle-brother voiced such opinions.

It felt as if Baeloch were questioning the decisions of their leaders – although, of course, he never went that far.

Tarryn trusted his leaders implicitly. Sergeant Juster, he felt confident, had never issued an order without good reason. Even so, sometimes he found those reasons difficult to grasp. *Were* they wasting their time in this jungle, Tarryn wondered, when there were bigger, more important battles to be fought in the cities outside of it?

Could Baeloch be right?



TWO

They reported in to base camp late the following day, having been out searching the jungle for ten days straight. The moons of Armageddon had come out, and they could hear the snuffling of nocturnal predators in the undergrowth.

They were greeted by bad news. Sergeant Juster heard it from the leader of another combat squad and passed it on to them. ‘The orks have taken Hive Acheron.’

Tarryn thought there must have been a mistake. Acheron was a huge city, to the east, housing billions of souls. How could it have fallen so easily?

Sergeant Juster sounded angry as he answered that unvoiced question. ‘It is said that a traitor threw open the gates for them.’

‘If only we could have been there,’ said Baeloch with a shake of his head. *Instead of tramping through this Emperor-forsaken jungle on a fool’s quest*, he may as well have added. ‘We could have prevented this.’

Their camp was a clearing, a kilometre in diameter, scoured out of the foliage with swords and flamers. It was ringed by transport shuttles, a steel barrier to any attackers. At its centre was a single prefabricated building, which served as their company’s command and communications centre.

Five other combat squads were present, three of them on sentry duty, while Chapter-serfs and the occasional half-machine servitor scuttled between them on endless errands. A number of Apothecaries and Techmarines stood by to help tend to the combatants’ wounds and patch up damage to their equipment.

The Relictors Fourth Company had established three bases before this one. A week or two from now, once their search of this area had been completed, they

would fly further southwards, scour out another clearing and the process would begin all over again.

Tarryn replenished his ammunition from the stores, held aboard one of the shuttles. He joined a group of battle-brothers who were stripping down and cleaning their boltguns. Sergeant Juster had dismissed his squad and reported to Captain Maegar in the command centre. Now, a serf came hurrying out of the centre on a mission.

He returned with a heavy-set figure, enwrapped in an onyx-black cloak with a blood-red lining over a tarnished breastplate. His temples were adorned with patches of greying hair, and his cheeks were ruddy with sweat from the late-evening heat. A warhammer was slung from his hip, its iron head engraved with holy sigils. Otherwise, he cut an unassuming figure, particularly by the standards of his order.

So, Inquisitor Halstron had been summoned to hear Juster's news!

Baeloch followed Tarryn's gaze and nodded. 'This is about what happened yesterday,' he deduced. 'You saw the vile symbols on that man's chest.'

He explained to the other Relictors about his squad's encounter with the mad Guardsman. One of them spoke up, thoughtfully: 'We disturbed a greenskin nest four days ago. They had marked themselves with the symbol of the Blood God too.'

'They're growing bolder,' another battle-brother remarked. 'We've all seen it. The feral orks are congregating in ever larger groups and have taken to lying in wait for us. Some have even started to lay crude traps.'

Baeloch nodded. 'Such as the spiked pit that Sergeant Kharran's squad discovered.' Tarryn had heard of other examples too.

Sergeant Juster emerged from the command centre. He had removed his helmet to reveal a chiselled, unscarred face, tightened by a thoughtful frown.

'You know what I hate most about these xenos?' Nabori grumbled. 'It's that they have no trophies worth the taking. Our only souvenirs of Armageddon are likely to be stone-headed axes and spears, and a handful of rat-skull bracelets.'

Tarryn was aroused from his half-sleep shortly after dawn, by a sound he hadn't heard in several weeks.

Aircraft engines were droning overhead. Instantly alert, he levered himself to his feet and looked up to the sky. He saw the last of a squadron of grey and black Stormtalons, passing high over the clearing. Their contrails showed them headed south-south-east – towards the sector of the jungle that his squad had searched

two days ago.

He doubted that the pilots would see much through the trees. They never did. The Stormtalons' very presence, however, suggested that something was afoot.

Captain Maegar must have summoned the ships from the Chapter's sky fortress at the edge of the system.

Tarryn's squad assembled, ready to head out into the jungle again. Before they left, the captain had them – and the rest of his company, those present – form up for a briefing. Normally, he would simply have reminded them of their mission and had his Chaplain bestow a blessing upon them. This morning, however, he talked at length about Hive Acheron's downfall.

He confessed that the Imperium had suffered a terrible setback, but sermonised that there were vital lessons to be learned from it: chief among them, a reminder of the importance of constant vigilance. 'We must ever be alert for the signs of treachery,' said the captain. 'Yes, even and especially in those who are closest to us. Remember, to question is to doubt, and doubt is the bane of faith.'

They had also been reminded of the urgency of their own assignment, he said. No one knew how many feral orks infested the equatorial jungle. Their numbers only seemed to have grown in half a century, despite the best efforts of Armageddon's ork hunters to control them. In a sense, these too could be called 'the enemy within'.

More than one tribe, it was rumoured, had marched out of the jungle already. They had joined up with Warlord Ghazghkull's armies, who had welcomed them into their ranks and equipped them for war. So long as the feral orks endured here, the invaders would always know where to look for reinforcements.

Tarryn couldn't resist a sidelong glance at Baeloch, to see how he reacted to that news. He held his grizzled jaw clenched, his square face set into its habitual stony expression. If he harboured any doubts about what Captain Maegar was telling them, he had the good sense not to show it.

Inquisitor Halstron watched from the wings – which was something new.

His lips were resting in a genial smile that failed to reach his eyes.

Tarryn didn't know what to make of his presence. Halstron had first appeared in the sky fortress, shortly after it had been dragged out of the warp and into the Armageddon System. Chapter Master Bardane had evidently been expecting him and had made a point of greeting this visitor himself.

Tarryn had seen little of the inquisitor since then. The word had been that he had attached himself to the First Company. He had followed them down to the planet's surface and into the jungle, albeit in a transport ship rather than a drop

pod. Tarryn had been secretly glad. Not even the most blameless individual could ever be completely comfortable under a witch hunter's scrutiny.

A month ago, Halstron had turned up here without warning. Tarryn hadn't been present to witness his arrival, but he had soon heard about it.

Unlike the inquisitors who Tarryn had seen before, this one had no retinue of which to speak. He had brought a single companion to Armageddon with him: a slight man of thirty years at most, with pallid skin and striking blue eyes that stared out from beneath a ragged blond fringe.

Nobody knew his name. They hadn't heard the inquisitor use it, while the pale man himself whispered in his master's ear and nobody else's. He rarely ventured out of the inquisitor's lander, and never without him.

He was swathed from neck to toe in dark, heavy robes and his pale face never seemed to betray an emotion, at least none that Tarryn could discern.

Something about the man – his very presence – made Tarryn feel uneasy. He knew that the others felt it too, though none of them could explain it.

Captain Maegar announced a change to the Relictors' orders.

Their planned search pattern for the next ten days had been redrawn. Instead of heading to the north, Tarryn's combat squad, and the others who were headed out alongside them, were to march to the south-east once more.

'It must be because of the mad Guardsman, and what he told us,' said Nabori, as they waited for Sergeant Juster to join them and lead them out.

'Did you see Inquisitor Halstron watching us during the briefing?' asked Baeloch. 'He even brought his pet outside with him to observe us.'

'If there is a Chaos cult operating in this jungle,' Tarryn reasoned, 'of course it would concern the Inquisition.' It might even help to explain what the Relictors were doing here, he thought. *Remember, to question is to doubt.*

He wondered what was keeping Juster. As Tarryn turned to look for him, he bumped into a slight, robed figure. At first, he mistook it for a serf. He opened his mouth to issue a rebuke, but the first word caught in his throat.

The inquisitor's aide – his 'pet', as Baeloch would have it – raised his chin and locked gazes with the looming Space Marine. Tarryn had that uneasy feeling about him again, even stronger than before, gnawing in the pit of his stomach.

The pale man's face was its usual blank canvas. His eyes were glazed over as if no spectacle could possibly capture their interest, and yet... Was there something lurking in there? A treacherous glint in the depths of those bright blue orbs?

‘To me!’ Inquisitor Halstron barked, and the pale man bowed his head and followed his master. The inquisitor led him away impatiently, without so much as a glance in anyone else’s direction.

They joined Captain Maegar and, a moment later, marched into the jungle alongside the captain and his command squad. It was the first time either of them had joined a search party – the first time they had left the safety of the camp at all, to the best of Tarryn’s knowledge – which provoked some comment from the others.

Tarryn didn’t join in the speculation. He tuned out his battle-brothers’ voices. He was thinking about the inquisitor’s mysterious aide.

When the two of them collided, his auto-senses had detected a jangle of metal. Where the fabric of the pale man’s robes had been flattened against his body, the outlines of stout chains underneath it had been betrayed.

The pale man had been shackled, beneath his robes. So, he wasn’t Inquisitor Halstron’s aide, after all; or, if he was, that was only a part of the story. He was also the inquisitor’s prisoner.



THREE

They heard the orks before they saw them.

Their guttural voices, the harsh and repetitive consonants of their underdeveloped language, were unmistakable. It was early afternoon, and this was the third nest their combat squad had discovered today. This time, however, there was something new about those voices, something strange.

Tarryn tuned his auto-senses to amplify the distant sound and realised what it was. This time, the voices had a lilting, almost rhythmic quality to them.

It didn't seem possible. Brother Baeloch, however, had discerned it too and was first to voice the inescapable conclusion. 'They're singing – or trying to.' The orks were chanting, at least, and it sounded like a drum was being beaten.

On Sergeant Juster's cue, the Relictors tightened their formation and marched towards the source of the sounds.

The sergeant had led them to a fresh sector of the jungle, just a short way to the south-east of where they had searched yesterday. He had told them nothing of his meeting with Inquisitor Halstron, so clearly there was nothing they needed to know.

The chanting/singing ceased abruptly and an ominous silence descended. 'They've heard us,' said Tarryn over the vox-link.

'They aren't trying to run, though,' said Baeloch. The Relictors would have heard any such attempt. 'They're waiting to see what we are.'

They're growing bolder, Tarryn's brother at the camp had told him. *The orks are congregating in ever larger groups and have taken to lying in wait for us.*

They had long since moved out of vox-range of the camp. They could pick up

other squads, occasionally, but none were close by at the moment. Tarryn wasn't worried, though. Five Space Marines had been more than a match for anything the jungle had thrown at them – so far, at least.

‘Sounded like a bigger group than normal,’ Kantus noted.

They were close now, enough to hear the furtive growls and muffled snorts of the creatures waiting for them. Suddenly, a squig let out a piercing squeal, but it was silenced by the impact of a heavy, wooden object.

The first feral ork – more impatient than its fellows – sprang out of the foliage in front of them. If the creature was startled to find itself so badly outnumbered, it didn't show it. It drove its spear towards Brother Nabori's stomach. Nabori thumbed his chainsword into life and sliced through the weapon's haft before it could touch him.

His battle-brothers surged forwards, with their weapons screaming.

They erupted into a small clearing. Several squigs scattered in front of them: undersized, malformed creatures, with heads too large for their squat bodies and too many teeth in their gaping maws. The squigs were also born from alien spores: another, even less developed form of orkoid life. It was said that, despite their shared genetic origins, the feral orks cultivated the squigs as food animals.

At one end of the clearing, another animal – a large local beast – lay gutted. A stone slab had been hammered upright into the ground, smaller stones piled around it. The dead creature's entrails were smeared across the stones, and a familiar stylised-skull symbol was scrawled upon the slab in its blood.

It was an altar, Tarryn realised.

An arrow clattered uselessly off his helmet. Its stone tip was glistening, coated with some kind of venom. His auto-senses picked out four archers at the far side of the clearing, lurking among the trees there. The majority of the feral orks, however, were armed with close-range weapons. They fell upon the intruders in their midst, bellowing a collective war cry.

There were close to a score of them. Two of them came at Tarryn. One swung a stone-headed axe in each hand while the other strained to wield a massive club, in which numerous sharpened stone splinters, and a few of metal, had been embedded.

They seemed to have a leader: a larger ork than the others, with tusks that were longer and sharper. It was hanging back, snarling out orders. The dyed patterns on the leader's face were more elaborate than those of its underlings, and it clattered with bone-carved jewellery.

It held a more advanced weapon too, a rusted shotgun. It must have salvaged it

– or even won it in combat – from an Imperial soldier, perhaps another lost Guardsman like the one they had found two days ago.

The ork fumbled clumsily with its trophy. It found the trigger, but neglected to brace itself for the shotgun's recoil. It only succeeded in pumping a slug into a luckless squig as the weapon bucked out of its hands.

Nabori had already dispatched his first opponent – the hasty one – and he joined his brothers in the clearing. His arrival balanced the odds against them somewhat, and allowed Sergeant Juster to disengage from the melee momentarily.

He set his sights on the ork leader as it scabbled in the dirt.

Juster's chainsword was his most prized possession. Its first owner had been the legendary Captain Bylar, who had wielded it during the Blood Star campaign. It was imbued with three centuries' worth of proud history.

The ork leader's hand tightened around its fallen weapon – as the chainsword severed that same hand neatly at the wrist.

Tarryn's weapons were newer, his own blade barely five decades forged, but he hoped that one day they might have a history too. He was writing a chapter of that history now, in ork blood. One of his attackers – the club-wielder – had recoiled from a burst of bolter fire. That freed him to focus on the other, and his chainsword gouged a scarlet trench across its stomach. The feral ork staggered. Tarryn thought it was going to fall, but then it came at him again, spitting gobbets of blood.

He parried the first of its stone axes, and twisted so that the second glanced harmlessly off a pauldron. He flung his opponent away from him, but another ork was coming at him from the right. In turning to deal with this new threat, he had to leave his left flank exposed. Tarryn felt the massive, studded club smashing into his side and a jagged metal splinter embedded itself in his armour.

These feral orks *were* bolder than he had seen before, he thought. They were bolder and stronger, more vicious and better equipped. Even their squigs had rallied from the Relictors' arrival and were snapping viciously at their heels.

Their leader was the strongest of them. Even without its purloined shotgun, it was giving Juster a good fight. It was wrestling with him, strong fingers locked about his armoured wrist, denying him the chance to swing his venerable blade.

As the contest began to swing the Relictor's way, the ork leader barked out another order. Tarryn couldn't translate the ugly words, but one of the archers set down its bow in response to them. For the first time, Tarryn glimpsed a crude wooden cage standing beside it, inside which something was moving.

He claimed his first kill, slicing his opponent from hip to throat. He rounded on the ork that had damaged him, but found that he had been beaten to it. He was just in time to see the tip of Kantus's chainsword emerging from the startled creature's chest.

He levelled his bolter at the ork with the axes instead. It was struggling to stand, until Tarryn put a bolt-round through its left eye, into its tiny brain. At the same time, he stamped on one of the squigs underfoot for good measure.

Almost half the feral orks were down by now, dying or dead. Their leader found itself on its back again, sprawled at Juster's feet. Juster raised his chainsword and struck downwards at its exposed neck.

Baeloch had made it deeper into the clearing than any of them. He parried an axe with his chainsword, while snapping off shots at the half-hidden archers. His ranged weapon of choice was a meltagun; its concentrated beam of heat burned through the flora effortlessly and turned ork flesh into slag.

Reaching the altar, he turned his fury upon it, scattering its stones with his whirling blade. A sharp blow from his heel broke the upright slab in half, while a melta-beam liquefied its blasphemous inscription.

Another ork had stumbled blearily into the clearing, from the direction of the cage. It had the appearance of a shaman, with black and red feathers on its head. It brandished a large wooden staff topped with a skull, and it was shaking – trembling in terror, Tarryn thought at first, but he soon realised his mistake.

The newcomer dropped to its knees, clutching at its head in abject agony, and suddenly Tarryn knew what it was. A *weirdboy*, as its brethren would have called it – a greenskin psyker – and it was shaking not with fear but with the pent-up energy of the warp itself.

The other Relictors saw what was coming too. They loosed off as many shots as they could at the newcomer, even when it meant turning their backs on their own opponents. They riddled the convulsing psyker with bolter fire, hoping to kill it before it could utilise the energies building inside it.

The weirdboy jerked and thrashed beneath the sustained onslaught. Then its head snapped back, it threw open its mouth, wider than Tarryn would have thought possible, and it spewed out wave after wave of sickening force.

Tarryn found himself lying on the jungle floor.

The blast had thrown him over fifty metres. He felt as if the inside of his head had been scoured by fire, and his stomach was churning. He checked his internal chrono. He had been unconscious for a moment, no longer – long enough, all the

same, for an enemy to ensure he never woke again.

He hauled himself to his feet. His eyes were blurry. He heard movement ahead of him, from the clearing. The rest of his squad were back there. He was relieved to find his battle-brothers unharmed; self-conscious too, at being the last of them to recover.

The ork weirdboy was dead.

It had been killed by their bolters, after all, but the unholy energies seething within its mortal frame had still demanded their release.

Nor had those energies distinguished between friend and foe. At least two feral orks had been cut down by them, or disoriented enough for their enemies – those who had weathered the blast better than Tarryn had – to finish them off. An archer was just coming to its senses beneath the trees, blood trickling from its snout. Brother Kantus's chainsword decapitated it before it could stand.

The clearing and the undergrowth around it were littered with squig corpses.

There was a silence too that felt unnatural. Tarryn realised, eventually, why that was. He had learned to tune out the ubiquitous sounds of their environment, among them the droning of insects. He hadn't immediately missed that sound, once it was gone.

Aside from the five Space Marines, in this part of the jungle, for now, no other sentient life survived.

Priority level: Magenta Alpha

Transmitted: Imperial Command HQ, Hive Infernus, Armageddon Secundus

To: Adeptus Astartes battle-barge *Blade of Vengeance*, Armageddon High Orbit

Date: 3014999.M41

Transmitter: Astropath Prime Rankor

Receiver: Astropath-terminus Xhian-Ji

Author: Commissar Marco Rickarius, 93rd Armageddon Steel Legion

Thought for the Day: Step not from the path of the Emperor.

I regret to report that the defence of our city is failing. Our watch spires have sighted a fresh force of orks marching across the ash wastes from the Pallidus Mountains. They number in the tens of thousands and have great engines of destruction among them. They will join the attackers at our gates within days. We request the assistance of Adeptus Astartes forces as a matter of urgency. You are our only hope.



FOUR

Decario had had the vision again.

He hadn't been seeking it, this time. It had come to him unbidden, as he had trodden the walkways of the fortress-monastery between his solar and the Librarium.

The image had smashed its way into his mind, through the barriers he had erected over a lifetime. It had blinded his eyes to all else, so intense had it been. Had he not been wearing his armour, he would probably have fallen.

He had come back to his senses, to the real world, with a headache, a dry mouth and a deep-rooted sense of foreboding.

A passing Chapter-serf had looked at him askance, and Decario had realised that he was leaning against a wall for support. He had straightened up and forced himself to walk on. It wouldn't have done for someone in his position to show weakness.

Decario was one of the most important members of his Chapter, a peer of the Chapter Master himself. It wasn't pride that made him believe this; the Emperor knew, he had wished it were not so often enough. He was the Chief Librarian of the Relictors, however, and the Chapter Master did as his Librarians advised him.

It behoved Decario, therefore, to advise him wisely.

He retook his desk in the Librarium: a circular chamber at the fortress-monastery's heart, with a high, vaulted ceiling that echoed every footstep, every

whisper, every breath. He sifted through the latest reports from the Armageddon jungle.

A message from the Fourth Company's Captain Maegar, who was stationed in the south, sounded hopeful. He spoke of feral orks exhibiting strange behaviour and of the deranged ramblings of a displaced Imperial Guardsman.

Decario had prayed for something more concrete by now. Still, he noted that Halstron had joined up with Maegar's company, so the inquisitor must believe there was some substance to their findings.

The Librarium was busier than normal. Decario had assigned all the lower ranks he could spare to the task of combing through the Chapter's extensive records again. They all knew about his visions, at least as much as they needed to know. They were searching the dusty past for a clue to illuminate the future.

Had there been such a clue in the ancient records, of course, then Decario would have discovered it long ago. Still, they had no hope but to try.

He lingered over a message from an Imperial Guard regiment, based in one of Armageddon's hive cities. They were under siege, pleading for assistance.

They had sent their request to the Blood Angels Chapter Master. A hero of the Second War for Armageddon, Lord Commander Dante had been an obvious choice to direct the Third. Almost thirty Adeptus Astartes Chapters had responded to his call to arms, and Dante had taken on the task of coordinating their forces.

He had forwarded the Steel Legion's distress call to several Chapters, the Relictors included, and flagged it as urgent. He hadn't issued an order – yet.

The Relictors had chosen their own assignment on Armageddon. Their Chapter Master, Bardane, had informed Dante of that decision, but only after his troops had put down in the equatorial jungle.

Dante had deferred, in the end, to Bardane's intransigence – though he hadn't been happy about it, by all accounts. There were greater, more imminent threats to be countered, in his opinion, than that of the jungle's unruly denizens.

Bardane had warned Decario that the matter was unlikely to rest there.

He laid the data-slate down on his desk and reached for a stylus. He began to compose a reply to the lord commander. *Utmost regrets... Operations in the jungle have reached a critical stage... Believe that the feral orks present a clear and present danger... All forces committed at this time...*

He attributed the message to Bardane. It wouldn't have done for Dante – or any outsider – to know that his Chapter Master was currently indisposed. He set the message aside. He would have it transmitted tomorrow. With the Emperor's

grace, another Chapter would have come to Hive Infernus's rescue by then.

He was struggling to focus on his work.

There were too many people around him, their footsteps echoing, and his head was still fragile. The vision still lurked behind his eyes.

Decario had lived a long time. His gene-seed implants kept him physically vital, but there were days when he felt every one of his four-hundred-plus years. The choices he had made throughout his long life weighed heavily on his soul.

He rose from his seat, deciding that a stroll might clear his mind.

His wanderings took him to a window at the edge of the basilica. He peered out through its stained glass – actually, an armourglass compound – across the spires and battlements of the north quadrant.

'North' was an arbitrary designation, of course. There were no magnetic poles for reference out here. The Relictors Chapter had been exiled from its home world fifty years ago, forced to wander the stars. Their home now was a Ramilies-class star fort: their 'sky fortress'. It had had a name once, but very few of them remembered it. The name was considered to be outdated.

The Relictors had had another name once, too.

Armageddon, through the window, was a pinprick of light against the freckled tapestry of the Segmentum Solar. The war that raged across its continents seemed tiny, insignificant when set against the breadth of a galaxy like this. It was simply a matter of perspective.

In his mind's eye, Decario had drifted tens of thousands of light years – and a century and a half – away, in any case. He was clad in the same suit of Terminator armour, but it was painted in the proud colours of the Fire Claws Chapter: orange and black. His right fist crackled with the energy of an oversized power glove – and he was certain that he was about to die.

His assault squad had stormed a hijacked space hulk as it drifted into the Stygies System. They had fought a running battle along the ship's abandoned decks against an outmatched crew of Chaos Space Marines – until finally, the traitors had regrouped in the cavernous engine room, where their leader had entered the fray.

He had called himself the Excoriator, and he was a potent Chaos Champion, with a sword forged in the flames of the Eye of Terror itself. Decario had fought toe to toe with him. He had lost. The daemon blade had shattered his force sword and broken his armour. His power fist had severed the Excoriator's sword arm, but even this had barely slowed him. Four brothers had given their lives to save their commander as he had sprawled helplessly on the ground.

He had sworn that he would make their sacrifices matter.

His flailing hand had alighted upon a weapon beside him, dropped during the battle. Decario didn't stop to wonder by whom. By the time he understood what he was holding, it had been too late. He saw the Excoriator turning towards him again, and he struck out at his nemesis with all his rapidly waning strength.

A single action, taken in a desperate moment, but it had changed his life – and the destiny of his Chapter – forever.

‘Listen. Listen to me.’

It had been the voice of Inquisitor de Marche that had reached him.

‘There is only the Emperor. Say it with me.’

The daemon was battering at the sagging gates of his mind. Decario could feel its oily black talons straining through the bars, tearing at his sense of self.

‘There is only the Emperor, and He is our shield and protector.’

The inquisitor had fought at his side, he had recalled. The Excoriator's sword had laid him low. He was bleeding, but still clinging to life and to consciousness. He clung to the sword too, but lacked the strength to wrest it from Decario's grip.

‘The daemon is bound within the blade. You must cast out the daemon from your mind and relinquish the sword.’

Somehow, he had pulled the scattered splinters of his psyche together and done as the inquisitor's insistent voice exhorted him. Letting go of the sword had felt like surrendering a part of himself, but that had just been a lie of the warp.

He had woken on his knees, on the enginarium's floor, and for the first and last time he had wept, convinced that he was lost. He had opened himself up to the corruption of Chaos, and his soul was indelibly stained.

He had thrown himself at Inquisitor de Marche's mercy. He had prayed for the Emperor's forgiveness, but de Marche had laid down the daemon sword and knelt beside him. He had turned Decario's head towards the still-twitching corpse of the Chaos Champion, decapitated by his own evil blade.

‘Don't you see? There is nothing to forgive.’

Decario thought about his old friend now, as he gazed out at the stars. De Marche had been a grim, distant figure before – as so many members of the Ordo Malleus were – cloaked in his own dark secrets. Following the battle aboard the *Captor of Sin*, however, he and Librarian Decario had grown inseparable.

He still felt the sorrow of the last time he had seen him, when the Inquisition had come to take one of their own.

There had been no choice but to hand de Marche over to the Ordo Hereticus. The Relictors had had to accept their punishment too and serve their penance, for allowing de Marche's ideas to taint them. The alternative would have been their Chapter's destruction – and they had to survive.

Decario blinked away the image of de Marche, his head stooped, his eyes hooded as he was led away to his fate in chains. He let another image swim in front of his mind's eye instead: the one that he had been seeing in dreams for weeks.

The image was that of an eye without a lid, always open, staring back into the Chief Librarian's soul even as he stared at it, and weeping viscous tears of blood.

He had known, when he had lifted that sword a century and a half ago – as vehemently as he had denied it, even to himself, he had *known* – that, in truth, he had been chosen to fulfil a higher purpose. He had felt the same way when he had let them take de Marche and held his silence.

The vision of the bleeding eye was only proof of what he had always believed.

The war on Armageddon meant nothing, less than nothing, when compared to the carnage about to engulf the entire Imperium. The only thing that mattered was that the Relictors were ready to turn back the Chaos tide. They had dire need of the artefact that, according to Decario's divinations, had been lost and was buried deep in Armageddon's sprawling equatorial jungle.

They needed the shard.



FIVE

The jungle air was thick with the stench of death. Even the Relictors' helmets couldn't filter it out completely. They heard the buzzing of insects – much louder than usual, concentrated a short way ahead of them – and the mocking cry of a carrion bird.

It was hardly a surprise then, when they came upon the first body.

It was Tarryn who saw it. It was hidden in the undergrowth; he might have missed it, or stumbled over it, had a cloud of fat, black flies not marked its resting place.

A feral ork. It was spread-eagled on its stomach, exposing a bloody gash between its shoulder blades. 'Looks like it was felled by an axe,' he voxed his brothers.

The blow hadn't killed its victim immediately. The ork had tried to run. Tarryn could trace its path easily with his eyes, from the branches it had broken and the blood it had left smeared on them.

The Relictors followed that path and found more bodies at the end of it.

There had been a brutal battle here, evidently. The jungle had been trampled in an area a hundred metres across. At least forty feral orks lay strewn across that area. Most of them were dead, but one of them stirred and made a feeble grab at Kantus's ankle with a broken, bloodied hand. A bolt-round put it out of its misery.

'What do you think did this?' Nabori murmured.

Another combat squad, was Tarryn's first suspicion. Somehow, they had strayed off course into a neighbouring sector, or another squad had wandered

into theirs.

A closer inspection, however, revealed no chainsword bites upon the scattered corpses, no bolt-rounds embedded in their hides. The orks had been killed by clubs, axes and arrows. 'They did it to each other,' Tarryn realised.

'Rival greenskin tribes?' suggested Baeloch.

Sergeant Juster shook his head. 'Look at their markings. They're the same – two red stripes, crossed through, on the left shoulder.'

'They're the same tribe,' Nabori concluded.

'We've seen infighting before,' said Juster. 'Maybe two or three greenskins squabbling over who gets to be the leader. But nothing on this scale.'

Many of the feral orks were locked together, even in death, even with their primitive weapons discarded or broken. Their fingers were gouged into each other's muscles, their tusks tearing through each other's flesh.

'A violent madness must have seized them,' said Kantus.

'One that couldn't be sated nor exhausted, until every last one of them was dead,' agreed Tarryn.

It was a sombre group of Space Marines who finally left that charnel place behind them. The morning was young and they had much ground to cover before sundown.

Nor did the jungle seem disposed towards easing their passage. It grew more densely and in tighter knots around them than in any area they had been before. Its canopy, high above the Relictors' heads, had closed its fingers, and the light of the distant sun had to strain to reach them.

To Tarryn, it felt as if the jungle were closing in around the Space Marines.

He thought about the battle he had fought, three days ago. He thought about the feral ork that had violated his mind and laid him low. He knew that some greenskins developed such talents – as did some men, touched by the corruption of the warp – but it was a rare phenomenon. It felt like another bad omen.

His squad had fought several other battles since then, albeit none quite as fraught. They had encountered and killed more feral orks in three days than they had in the whole of the preceding week: as if, for some reason, they were gathering in this area.

They're growing bolder...

Other squads, they had learned from their infrequent vox-contacts, had observed increases in ork activity too. Many of them had taken casualties. A number of their enemies had been armed with scavenged weapons, or spears and

axes had been more skilfully crafted than most and better able to slice through armour plating.

Two Relictors had been killed, and one combat squad had disappeared entirely. Nobody had heard from them in almost a week. Captain Maegar had sent twenty battle-brothers after them, but as yet there had been no news from the search party, at least none of which Tarryn had been apprised.

His thoughts kept returning to the site of the massacre.

What profane force, he wondered, could have incited so many feral orks into such a murderous frenzy as to slaughter their own kin? *The same force, perhaps,* he thought, *that could drive an Imperial Guardsman out of his mind.*

‘I’ve got that stink in my nostrils again,’ Kantus grumbled, presently.

He wasn’t the only one.

The Relictors picked their way through the foliage, cautiously. As Sergeant Juster reminded them, there could still be an ambush ahead of them. None of them were surprised, however, by what they discovered instead.

Another feral ork killing ground. Another place of death.

It was just like before; in fact, the scene was eerily similar. Around forty gouged and battered corpses, festering in the midday sun, and no sign of any enemy, any force that could have visited this grisly fate upon them. No force but their own.

The victims had died in the past two or three days, and each bore the same design upon its left shoulder: two stripes, painted with red jungle dye, crossed through.

Sergeant Juster lifted a body with his toe. It was lying on its stomach, with an arrow shaft protruding from the back of its neck. ‘It can’t be...’

Tarryn saw it too, though, like his sergeant, he found it impossible to believe.

He was standing beside an ancient, wizened tree, with roots like gnarled claws clinging stubbornly to the ground. It had weathered the recent carnage, while many around it had been felled or broken. Between its roots, small patches of ugly, black flowers sprouted pugnaciously, and two feral orks lay locked in a deathly embrace.

He looked over his shoulder and, just where he had expected to find it, there lay the ork that had stirred and made a futile grab for Kantus’s ankle.

Baeloch still needed more convincing.

He turned and marched brusquely away from the others. He took a well-trampled path, but the jungle soon swallowed him up regardless. A moment later,

his voice broke over the vox-channel. He had found the ork that had run, with the axe wound in its back – the one that Tarryn had originally come across.

‘The same place again,’ breathed Nabori.

‘But how could we have come back here?’ asked Tarryn.

No one could answer that question.

When the Relictors had set out from this position before, they had marched due south to the border of their assigned sector. There, they had turned ninety degrees to the left and, a short march later, they had done the same again.

So, how could they have ended up back in the same place?

They should have been facing northwards – and they *had* been, they were sure of it – so, how could they possibly have approached this site from the east?

Tarryn’s auto-senses confirmed it, concurring with his brothers’ readings. The first trail they had ploughed still ran across their path, from north to south.

‘Could something have baffled our instruments?’ Nabori conjectured.

‘Or perhaps our wits,’ offered Kantus.

Tarryn seized upon the first, and less disturbing, of those possibilities. ‘A disturbance in the planet’s magnetic field here, perhaps.’

‘In which case, why didn’t our Stormtalon pilots report it when they scouted this area three days ago?’ asked Baeloch, rejoining them.

‘Remember the Guardsman?’ said Nabori. ‘Remember what he said?’

‘Who cares about the babblings of a heretic?’ Baeloch sneered.

But Tarryn remembered: *...Ran as far as I could... I kept running, but it was always there again in front of me... waiting for me...*

‘What do we do?’ asked Kantus.

‘Turn back and report what we have seen to the Librarium?’ suggested Baeloch. He was testing their sergeant, seeing what his reaction would be.

‘Not yet,’ Juster answered him. ‘I want to search the area again first – the area we thought we were searching before, I mean.’

‘March south again,’ agreed Kantus.

‘Or back east, the way we just came from?’ suggested Tarryn.

The sergeant turned on the spot, mulling over his options. Tarryn couldn’t see his face behind his helmet, but he knew that, if he could, he would see a familiar thoughtful frown etched upon it. Juster glanced up at the sun, through the jungle canopy, as if to check it was still where it was meant to be. Then, he made his decision.

‘That way,’ he said, pointing. ‘We go that way. If there’s something, something hidden in this jungle that the jungle doesn’t want to let us see...’

‘Then it must be somewhere we haven’t trodden yet,’ Nabori concluded.

‘Somewhere in there,’ said Tarryn; and, as one, the five Relictors turned and gazed into the shadows of the unexplored jungle to the south-east.

‘Keep close together,’ ordered the sergeant, wading through the grasping undergrowth.

‘Baeloch, you’re our guide. Don’t let your auto-senses do all the work – question everything they tell you. Kantus and Tarryn, don’t take your eyes off your auspexes, not for a single second. You see any unusual readings – even the slightest flicker – I want to hear about it.’

‘Nabori, I’ll need a time check from you every two minutes. On each check, I want the four of you to sound off loud and clear. Let me know you’re still with me, in mind as well as in body, I mean.’

Tarryn knew what he meant, and he made a vow to himself: that the jungle wouldn’t cloud his senses again, if indeed it had before. He recited a litany of protection under his breath, building barriers around his mind against any intrusion.

He focused on the readings from his auspex, as Juster had instructed him.

He found out – later – that it was Kantus who had walked into the tripwire.

All Tarryn was aware of at the time was a violent flash, before the blast wave hit him like a brick wall in front of a speeding Scout bike. He saw it coming, thanks to his augmented reflexes, for a fraction of a second: too short a time to drop to the ground or brace himself or do anything but try to ride the wave out.

For the second time, he came to floundering in the dirt on his back. Tiny metal fragments showered down on top of him. Tarryn felt his ears popping. Wispy fingers of smoke crept over him, as small fires flickered in the brushwood around him.

He could make out a grey and black heap lying close by, but he couldn’t tell which of his brothers it was, nor if he was conscious or even alive. For a moment, it felt as if the world were holding its breath.

Then, the feral orks descended upon them in force.



SIX

Tarryn and his brothers – his surviving brothers – were in retreat.

He wasn't happy about it; he had never withdrawn from a fight before, but he had had no choice. Sergeant Juster had given the order. He had also led the retreat to begin with, though Baeloch had taken his place when he had faltered.

They retraced their steps to the site of the feral ork massacre. From here, they had a choice of trampled paths. They turned north, towards the camp site. They had hoped that their recent tracks criss-crossing this area might baffle their pursuers; failing that, that the sight of their brethren, cut down and left to rot, might give the orks pause.

An eager war cry was raised, too close behind them. The greenskins had the scent of blood in their nostrils and wouldn't give up the hunt so easily.

Brother Kantus had died first.

He must have felt the tug of the wire across his greave and known, an instant before the others knew, what it portended.

Somehow, the orks had acquired a cache of explosives. They had bundled them together, the entire cache, probably, and lodged them in the cleft of a tree. They had attached the tripwire to them, then waited to spring an ambush on any enemy who survived their explosive trap.

Kantus had hurled himself onto the explosives as he had seen them falling. He had taken the brunt of the blast and his armour had been shattered.

Nabori had fallen next, overpowered by the weight of their enemy's numbers.

The feral orks had kept coming at them, wave after relentless wave, at least a hundred of them and probably many more.

Tarryn had been fortunate that Baeloch had been thrown close to him. They had fought back to back, so that neither of them could be taken from behind. He had lost count of the number of green hides that his chainsword's teeth had tasted.

He had found himself duelling with a heavy-jowled brute. He blocked its first axe blow with his blade, but felt the jolt of it up to his right shoulder. His bolter, he was using to discourage an attack from his left.

The big feral ork grappled him, pinning his sword arm to his side. Despite its squat shape, it stood almost as tall as he did. It strained to reach his throat with its teeth, and he found himself looking right down its gaping maw. He could see tiny jungle creatures, still twitching between its jagged teeth.

He lodged his bolter beneath the brute's grinding jaw and squeezed the trigger.

It let go of him and reeled away in blind panic; its huge body wasn't quite aware yet that its head was gone.

Tarryn's victory had come at a cost, however. One of the orks to his left had landed a blow on him. Its axe head had struck him between the ribs, the very point at which his armour had been cracked by a studded club three days earlier. He had patched up the damage as best he could manage on the move, but until they returned to camp, he lacked the resources to effect a full repair.

His helmet lit up with warning runes as ceramite and plasteel splintered, leaving his flesh unprotected. A fibre bundle, part of his armour's electrical nervous system, had been nicked too, and suddenly his left leg was almost too heavy to lift.

He pivoted on his foot instead and repaid his attacker in kind for its impertinence.

The feral ork's only armour was a patchwork of animal hides, secured around its torso by dried-out vines. Tarryn's chainsword sliced through it – and through the flesh, muscle and bone underneath – and out the creature's other side.

He had earned a momentary respite, which he used to take stock of the rest of the battlefield. That was when he saw that Sergeant Juster was in trouble.

We should have held our ground, thought Tarryn. *We should have fought.*

They could have beaten the feral orks, despite their numbers. At the very least, they could have punished them for their cowardly attack. They could have ensured that those few of them that survived would live the rest of their lives in abject terror of the holy wrath they had seen unleashed.

At best, they might have saved Brother Nabori.

When last Tarryn had seen him, he had still been struggling, despite his grievous injuries, from a prone position. A score of feral orks had leapt on top of him, but half had been hurled away as quickly. He had disappeared beneath a writhing mountain of green flesh. He might still have been alive. It seemed unlikely, but if the Emperor were with him, it was possible.

Space Marines were a hardy breed; many enemies over the millennia had pronounced one dead when he had simply withdrawn into a healing coma.

Sergeant Juster was no coward – that went without saying – so, why would he have abandoned their brother when there was still a chance, however slight, that he might be saved? Why were they retreating?

Juster had been closer to the explosion than the other survivors.

It had taken him a moment longer to recover his senses. The feral orks had been on him before he could clamber to his feet. He had been out on his own and was suddenly surrounded, overwhelmed. They had battered his head with their clubs. They had dented his helmet and smashed his eye lenses, effectively blinding him.

Every time he tried to stand, they had dragged him down again.

Tarryn had seen his sergeant's plight and snatched a frag grenade from his belt. He had pitched it into the heart of the blood-crazed mob. The feral orks had recognised it for what it was, and had known what it could do to them. They had scattered, leaving Juster to take the blast; but there *was* no blast.

Sergeant Juster had scrambled to join Tarryn and Baeloch, gratefully. A pair of feral orks had emerged from cover to follow him, howling indignantly at the way they had been fooled – as the time-delay on the grenade expired and it burst in their faces.

'I'm slowing you down. Leave me.'

Sergeant Juster had wrenched off his helmet. He said he couldn't breathe in it. His handsome face, unblemished by a century of service, had been ruined. His skull, above his left ear, was cracked and his fair hair was matted with blood.

His right eye had been dislodged from its socket and his nose ground into mush. He had lost his left pauldron too, and his collarbone was broken.

'You can make it,' Tarryn urged him.

'I said leave me,' spat Juster. 'That's an order.'

He had already stumbled three times during their flight. The third time, he had landed on his hands and knees and resisted Tarryn's efforts to help him stand

again. His eyelids had drooped, his speech had slurred, but he had fought his way back to awareness – or been stimulated back to it by the auto-injectors in his armour.

‘We could make a stand here, sergeant,’ suggested Tarryn. ‘We could–’

Juster found the strength to seize him by the wrist and glare up into his eye slits. His jaw was set determinedly, his nostrils flaring and his undamaged eye was clear and bright. ‘Listen to me. I don’t matter. None of our lives matter. The only thing that matters is the message. Don’t risk the message for my sake.’

Tarryn glanced up at Baeloch, who simply shrugged.

‘Tell the captain and the inquisitor what we found,’ said Juster. ‘The massacre, the ambush, what the jungle doesn’t want us to see. They have to know.’

‘Know what?’ asked Tarryn, confused. ‘What have we found?’

‘The monolith,’ said Juster, almost choking on the words. ‘Angron’s Monolith.’

They heard footsteps, crashing along the trampled path behind them.

A lone feral ork came lumbering through the undergrowth. It braked when it saw the three Relictors and unleashed a keening howl. Baeloch gunned it down, but there came answering howls from behind it. The orks – every greenskin in the vicinity – knew where their enemies were now, which route they had taken.

Juster grabbed Tarryn’s arm with his other hand too, and hauled himself laboriously to his feet. His armour’s servo-motors whirred, compensating for the weakness in his muscles. ‘Go. Both of you, go,’ he instructed. ‘Leave the orks to me. As long as I have strength in my arms, they will not pass me.’

Tarryn agreed, resignedly. Again, he had no choice.

But Juster hadn’t let him go yet. ‘Give me your blade, and take mine,’ he urged. He tried to bundle his chainsword into Tarryn’s hands. ‘Captain Bylar–’

‘I know,’ said Tarryn, but he didn’t take the weapon.

‘The history of our Chapter, dating back to when we were Fire Claws, is ingrained within this steel,’ insisted Juster. ‘It has been my honour to safeguard that history and to add my own modest exploits to it, but the honour is yours now.’

‘You should keep it,’ said Tarryn. He didn’t feel worthy. ‘Hold off the orks with it. Let the sword be steeped in the blood of one more legendary deed. It will make its way back to us, if such is the Emperor’s will, and be all the more venerable for it.’

Juster nodded, gratefully.

Baeloch handed over his frag grenades. Tarryn had used both of his: the first to

rescue Juster from the feral orks, the second to keep the greenskins at bay while they ran. The sergeant had two grenades of his own and two more now. They would buy him – buy all of them – a little time, at least.

They heard a familiar war cry, howling like the wind through the trees.

Juster was still bleeding from his head. His superhuman physiology hadn't been able to staunch the flow. The blood had trickled into his left eye and closed it. He sank to one knee and braced himself in that position, sighting along his boltgun. In his right hand, he cradled his first grenade. His treasured blade lay readied against his hip.

Again, he ordered Brothers Tarryn and Baeloch to leave him; this time, they did as he told them. They retreated, with the knowledge that had been entrusted to their keeping clutched close to their anguished hearts.

They retreated, and barely was their sergeant out of their sight behind them than they heard the first explosion and felt the jungle trembling beneath their feet.

They retreated, and Tarryn tried not to think about the weapons they had left behind, lost to them forever, still less the warriors who had wielded them. He didn't yet understand why three brothers had had to be sacrificed, but he knew there had to be a good reason.

Angron's Monolith.

The very name filled his hearts with dread.

Priority level: Magenta Alpha

Transmitted: Adeptus Astartes battle-barge *Blade of Vengeance*

To: Relictors sky fortress, outer edge of the Armageddon sector

Date: 3023999.M41

Transmitter: Astropath Prime Galdorian

Receiver: Unknown

Author: Lord Commander Dante, Blood Angels Chapter Master

Thought for the Day: Reason is the cloak of traitors.

Attention: Chapter Master Bardane. As you know, the enemy is straining at the gates of Hive Infernus, to the east of your Chapter's position. I can spare no other forces to support the garrison there. Hives Volcanus and Tempestora are also besieged and are defended by the Black Templars and my own Blood Angels respectively. I have sent the Iron Champions to reinforce the Celestial Lions at Hive Volcanus, while fighting persists amid the ruins of Hive Acheron. We must not allow another of the Emperor's cities to fall. Respectfully, therefore, I insist that you abandon your current operations in the jungle and redeploy your Chapter to Hive Infernus as a matter of the utmost urgency. I require that you acknowledge receipt of this directive.



SEVEN

There is nothing to forgive.

The voice echoed in Decario's mind again, as clearly as if the speaker had been standing at his shoulder. It was only a ghost, however.

He waited patiently in front of the great iron door. At the appointed minute – no earlier, no later – he heard the knocking of machine-spirits, as a complex series of locks cycled open. The door gave way with a sigh and a faint crackle of arcane energy, and the Relictors Chapter Master emerged from it.

Artekus Bardane had spent two weeks in the purifying chamber, undergoing a series of punishing rituals. He had needed to cleanse himself in body, in mind, and most importantly in soul, before he faced the trial to come.

Decario had brought him a pitcher of water. Bardane snatched it from him and quaffed it greedily. His shaved head glistened with sweat, his lips were chapped and his eyes were purple-rimmed. A whiff of incense clung to his muscular body.

He was wearing knee breeches and a simple cotton tunic, embroidered with the Relictors Chapter symbol: a white skull, in profile, on a field of black.

Bardane looked drained, as if he had been battling all the daemons of the immaterium single-handed, which, in a sense, he had. Decario, however – and he alone – had seen this often enough before. As his Chapter Master straightened and finally looked him in the eye – as Decario met his cool, resolute gaze – he knew that, once again, he had faced down those daemons and *won*.

'My armour,' said Bardane hoarsely. 'I want my armour, and then... Then, take me to the Vault.'

Decario smiled and nodded.

They walked the stone-flagged passageways side by side. Despite his recent ordeal, Bardane kept his head up and his back straight.

Decario filled him in on recent developments. He advised him that the search of the Armageddon jungle was still in progress. The monolith had not yet been located. There had been some promising signs, however, and he expected a report from Inquisitor Halstron in the near future.

He told Bardane about the distress call from Hive Infernus and Lord Commander Dante's request, and then his demand that the Relictors attend to it. Bardane absorbed the news in silence. Then, finally, he asked, 'What did we tell him?'

'The order was received in the last day,' said Decario. 'I thought it best, in the circumstances, to hold our response until you could—'

'Why?' Bardane interrupted him, sharply. 'What choice do I have in the matter?'

Decario held his tongue, out of courtesy.

The Chapter Master sighed. 'We knew it would come to this.'

'Indeed,' the Librarian agreed.

They had come to Bardane's solar. He halted outside it for a moment, gathering his strength. Then, he squared his broad shoulders, placed both hands on the doors and pushed through them. A small army of Chapter-serfs scurried to greet their master as the door swung shut behind him. Out in the passageway, Decario waited, again.

Over an hour passed before Artekus Bardane returned. During that time, he had undergone a transformation. He wore his armoured suit now: a burnished relic, emblazoned with battle honours and purity seals, though he had left off the helmet. Flames danced, reignited, in his eyes, and his jaw was locked into a determined grimace. Frown lines still furrowed his brow, but then they always had.

He is strong, thought Decario, as strong as ever, thank the Emperor!

'Have you had the vision again?' asked Bardane, as they resumed their journey.

'I have, and more clearly than before. Codicer Ibraxin has seen it too.'

'Then the warning it bespeaks—'

'Has become no less urgent,' Decario confirmed.

They were making better time now; in fact, the Chapter Master's purposeful stride threatened to leave his companion behind. They descended into the bowels

of the fortress-monastery, through secret doors and down narrow, winding staircases rarely trodden and known only to a chosen few. They halted, at last, before a door like that of the purification chamber, over three metres tall and cast from protective iron.

Torches guttered in sconces to each side of the door, having flared to life at the two Relictors' approach. Bardane pressed his palm against a panel beside the door, and arcane runes lit up across its surface.

'Who does Dante think he is?' he grumbled, sourly. 'I command the Relictors, not him. If I say we have more pressing concerns than one crumbling city out of millions...' He snapped his bald head around to glare at Decario, as if he were to blame. 'I have never disobeyed an order before.'

'We must have the shard,' said Decario.

'And Dante would keep us from it,' agreed Bardane. 'The pious archangel with his halo, pronouncing his judgements upon us all from behind his golden mask – how could he ever understand?'

The Vault was a long, high-ceilinged chamber, more like a museum than a storeroom, albeit a somewhat depleted one.

Its artefacts, those few that the Relictors had managed to gather since the old ones had been taken from them and destroyed, were stored in glass cases or wooden chests, some warded with arcane sigils, some wrapped in heavy iron chains.

Decario lit a taper from one of the torches outside. He touched it to the wicks of a row of stubby, black candles, which filled the large chamber with flickering shadows.

The centrepiece of the Vault was a carved pedestal, chest-high to an armoured Space Marine, crowned by a glass dome. Decario was drawn to the dome, as always. Nestled in the folds of a crushed-velvet bed beneath it was a twisted scrap of obsidian.

It didn't look like much – about a third of a metre long, with no particular shape, chipped and half melted along one edge – but it was the Relictors' most valuable possession.

He remembered when de Marche had brought it to them. The inquisitor hadn't known what the shard was, then, but he had sensed the power within it. When Decario had sensed it too, he had pleaded for it to be destroyed.

'Such power is nothing to be feared,' de Marche had scoffed.

He had begun to protest. 'But a malevolent power such as this—'

‘Is still a tool in the hands of its wielder. Have I taught you nothing? Must you remain as blind as the high priests and grandmasters of my order?’

‘Our enemies wield this power,’ Decario had recited, ‘so we must learn to wield it too. But what if the power is stronger than he who wields it?’

‘Then we must make the wielder stronger,’ de Marche had countered.

‘Such power drives our enemies to madness,’ Decario had reminded him.

A spark had flared in the inquisitor’s eyes, then, and the corners of his mouth had twitched. His words still echoed in the Librarian’s head now, across the intervening decades: *They say that there is strength in madness.*

Bardane had stridden to the far end of the Vault. A high, narrow table had been pushed up against the wall. A large, gilded chest – a reliquary, engraved with images of gods and daemons at war – sat squarely in its centre. Bardane removed a gauntlet. His bare hand traced the outlines of the carvings, until something inside the chest clicked.

He snapped open its latches and lifted its lid.

‘Is my honour guard assembled?’ The Chapter Master didn’t turn to look at Decario. His gaze was fixed on the reliquary’s contents.

‘Awaiting your orders, sir.’

‘And do we have transport to the planet?’

‘A Thunderhawk, on standby. As soon as we hear from Inquisitor Halstron.’

‘I see no reason to wait for him.’

‘As you wish. Artekus... With your leave, I would join you on this mission.’

Bardane did turn at that, with an eyebrow half raised in surprise. He asked no questions, however; he knew his fellow conspirator too well to ever wonder at his motives. He nodded his assent to the request and returned to his artefact.

Decario crossed the chamber to join him. He peered over Bardane’s shoulder, at the weapon they called the screaming flail – or the *Artekus Scourge*.

It resembled a simple flail, upon first glance – larger than most, admittedly – with three spiked chains trailing from a well-worn grip. As Bardane’s hand hovered over it, however, its chains began to twitch. By opening the chest, he had disabled the stasis field inside it, and now the flail was stirring from its long slumber.

‘We never saw Dante’s message,’ he proclaimed. ‘It must have been lost or scrambled in the warp. See to it.’

‘He won’t let it rest there,’ said Decario.

‘I know, but he won’t take any action against us without proof.’

The ends of the flail were beginning to glow, little sparks of energy flaring and

bursting around them. Decario thought he could see fleeting shapes in those sparks: twisted, anguished faces. He tore his eyes away from them.

‘There was no other option,’ he assured his Chapter Master.

‘I know,’ said Bardane, but his jaw had tightened further and the furrows in his brow had deepened. He had spent two weeks in isolation, ridding his body, mind and soul of impurities. If he doubted himself now, if he allowed his shield of faith to crack, it would all have been for nothing. He needed the strength the ritual gave him.

‘We do the Emperor’s will,’ said Decario, ‘and those who would condemn us for it – it is only because they are too fearful and too weak to share His confidence. They would see us engulfed, every world of man drowned in Chaos and blood, before they opened the shutters on their minds.’

‘Ignorance is blessed,’ Bardane muttered.

It took a certain kind of man to command the Relictors.

Decario had nominated Bardane for the position himself. He had come up through the ranks, not just accepting but embracing every facet of their mission as it had been revealed to him. The Chief Librarian, however, had seen something else in him too, something more than merely blind devotion. In the young Bardane, he had seen a measure of arrogance, a steadfast belief in himself. *He will need that arrogance*, he had thought. He would need to do more than just believe in his Chapter’s holy purpose; he would need to shoulder the ultimate responsibility for it.

Bardane took a breath. He plunged his hand into the reliquary and seized the wooden handle of the screaming flail. Without another word, he turned and marched out of the chamber. It was left to Decario to snuff out the black candles and follow him.

He cast a final glance at the pedestal as he passed it. Its twisted black shard pulsed with a faint inner light of its own, as if in answer to the flail’s unveiling.

In that light, he could see the impression left in the velvet beside it, where a second shard had, until recently, lain.



EIGHT

The two survivors made as good time back through the jungle as they dared. They were mindful of the risk of springing another trap, or walking into another ork ambush. Their pursuers, they were only too aware, were impeded by no such concerns. Indeed, they had already been attacked once.

Without warning, a trio of feral orks had sprung out of the undergrowth alongside them. Tarryn and Baeloch had hastened to deal with them, knowing just how quickly three could have become many more.

They were sending out vox-signals every minute, hoping to find another squad within range. At the same time, they were struggling to process what Sergeant Juster had told them, the secret he had revealed to them.

‘If there is a monument to Chaos here...’ Baeloch began.

‘We don’t know that,’ said Tarryn.

‘Angron’s Monolith. It sounds an ill enough name to me. Angron was—’

‘I know who Angron was.’ *The Red Angel, primarch to the World Eaters Legion. He joined the traitor Horus in his rebellion against the Emperor and reaped his sordid reward from the Ruinous Powers.*

‘A daemon prince of the Blood God,’ said Baeloch.

Angron had ignited the First War for Armageddon, invading with an army of the Lost and the Damned behind him. *The Space Wolves defeated him and banished him back to the warp – but what might he have left behind here?*

And what could a loyal servant of the Emperor ever want with such an artefact?

‘To question is to doubt,’ muttered Tarryn, ‘and doubt is the bane of faith.’

They heard stirrings in the jungle behind them, ahead of them, around them. Their auto-senses were picking up multiple heat signatures. Their pursuers knew this environment better than they did and were more cunning than they had grown to expect. Their numbers also seemed to be increasing.

Occasionally, the Space Marines heard a ragged howl as the feral orks summoned more of their kind to join them. *They're in league with the jungle*, thought Tarryn, *and they will kill us to protect its secret*. The Relictors had made it over halfway back to their base camp, but still had far to go. Had Sergeant Juster and the others died for nothing?

Baeloch came to a halt and drew his chainsword. 'We're surrounded,' he announced. He was right, and the feral orks were closing in slowly around them.

They were going to have to fight, after all.

Suddenly, there was a crackle in Tarryn's ear and the ghost of a half-familiar voice. He could only make out a few words, but it was enough. Their distress calls had finally been answered. *Too late*, he feared.

Another howl was raised ahead of them, but it spread like wildfire in a too-tight circle around them, building in intensity and volume. For the second time, they turned their backs to each other, Tarryn facing to the north, Baeloch southwards along their trampled path.

For the second time, they braced themselves as the feral orks – more of them than they had ever encountered at once before – came swarming towards them.

'–your situation? Repeat, what is–'

Tarryn recognised the voice. It belonged to Divolio, a veteran sergeant in the captain's command squad. He told him that Sergeant Juster had fallen, and two other battle-brothers besides. He struggled to get the words out and defend himself from the orks at the same time. He was being assailed from all directions, all but from behind, where his remaining brother protected him.

The primitive weapons of his attackers rained down on his armour like hailstones; it was almost more than he could do to parry half of them. He told Sergeant Divolio that they couldn't endure for much longer.

'–on our way–' said Divolio. Then, more clearly, '–this vox-channel open and we'll home in on your signal.' He was at the very edge of vox-range. There was no way he would make it here in time.

Tarryn fainted, making two of his opponents overconfident, causing one of them to stumble into the other. He made use of the breath he had bought himself. 'Sergeant Juster entrusted us with a message, for the captain. He said–'

'What are you doing?' Baeloch interrupted him, over their squad channel.

Tarryn didn't answer him. He slashed a feral ork's throat with his chainsword and hugged the heavy, wet corpse to him, using it as a shield. *Tell the captain and the inquisitor... They have to know...*

'We found it,' Tarryn voxed. 'We found...' It didn't feel right, speaking the name, especially over an open channel. '...the monolith.'

Silence greeted his pronouncement, but for a faint splutter of static. Then, another voice sounded in his ear, and he recognised the gruff tones of Maegar himself. 'We're sending help.'

The orks were falling away in front of him. Tarryn didn't know why. He had slain a fair few of them, but that hadn't discouraged them before. Then, suddenly, he saw something else behind them, a huge, slobbering beast with a rider, and he realised that they had been clearing the way for it to charge him.

The beast was a fully grown squig, known as a squiggoth – the first he had seen on Armageddon. It had the oversized head and squat body of its stunted brethren, but it also had a powerful-looking horn and giant tusks. It had a rickety wooden howdah on its back, containing its ork rider and an attendant group of smaller, weaker gretchin.

Tarryn fired his bolter at the rider. It would likely die more easily than the mount, and if it did die, the mount might veer off. He only had time for one shot, but he made it a good one. Blood blossomed from the rider's sneering brow and it tumbled backwards, but the beast had been worked up into a frenzy and it kept on coming.

The gretchin were squealing in panic, baling out of the howdah desperately. Tarryn couldn't dive for cover; there were too many feral orks around him, hemming him in. He yelled a warning to Baeloch about what was coming.

Then the squiggoth bowled into them both. Tarryn barely twisted out of the way of the beast's horn, else it would have gored him. He couldn't resist its hurtling weight, however, and the world went spinning, ground over sky, around him.

Baeloch was jarred too, but he kept his footing.

Tarryn was down and the feral orks were piling on top of him, as they had with Nabori, as they had tried to do with Juster. The squiggoth reared over him, its massive jaws stretching into a roar, and all he could think was that he hadn't done as Sergeant Juster had asked him. He had failed in his duty.

Then, the squiggoth erupted into flames.

It was thrashing about, screaming. The feral orks were scattering as well. They were wailing in terror – of being similarly burned or stamped upon? A bare few

clung tenaciously to Tarryn, few enough that he was able to hurl them off and scramble out from beneath the burning beast as it toppled towards him.

A new presence had joined the skirmish. It took him a moment to focus through the smoke and the mayhem, twice as long to accept what he was seeing.

A slight, pale man stood among the feral orks, but was untouched by them. His striking blue eyes met Tarryn's astonished gaze coolly.

He recognised Inquisitor Halstron's aide, his prisoner. His dark robes had fallen open to reveal the chains that enwrapped him. *But how could he be here? How could he have fought his way to where he stands, and without my seeing it?*

Where was the inquisitor and the rest of the command squad?

The feral orks were panicking, fleeing from the chained man. Tarryn felt an almost physical fear passing over him and had to steel himself not to flee too. A handful of greenskins likewise girded themselves and set about the chained man with their axes and clubs. They may as well have battered at the walls of the sky fortress itself, because their strongest blows glanced off their target, ineffectually.

He almost seemed bored.

He waved the feral orks away from him and, although he didn't touch them, some invisible force followed the sweep of his arm, lifted them off their feet and sent them flying. As they picked themselves up, the chained man closed his fingers into a fist and his bright eyes flashed. First one, then another, then a third feral ork exploded into flames as the squiggoth had before them. It was the last straw for those few that remained, and they ran for their lives.

A fusillade of bolts thudded into the chained man's torso.

Baeloch was firing at him, coldly squeezing off round after round – and wasn't that the right thing to do, the dutiful thing, because the chained man stank of Chaos?

Tarryn's armour was scratched and dented, but he hadn't been injured. Baeloch's bolter was hurting the chained man, making him jerk and twitch, although one wouldn't have known it from his expression. He regarded his attacker with a distant curiosity, and he reached out towards him and began to curl his fingers.

Tarryn snapped up his gun and sighted at the chained man's head.

'Hold your fire!'

A grey and black juggernaut burst out of the jungle beside them. Captain Maegar had reached them, two members of his command squad behind him. Inquisitor Halstron was here too, in his onyx and blood red cloak. He weaved

between his bulkier allies and barked a few sharp words at the chained man, who lowered his hand.

Tarryn lowered his gun, likewise, as did Baeloch, albeit with a measure of reluctance. ‘He isn’t what he seems, sir,’ the older Relictor protested. ‘He... It is some manner of warp-spawned daemon that has—’

‘This isn’t the time, brother,’ the captain growled. *Remember, to question is to doubt.* His voice softened. ‘I know you must have concerns,’ he allowed.

His remaining squad mates joined them. One was Sergeant Divolio; the other, Tarryn didn’t know well enough to identify from his armour’s markings. They had run into a bunch of fleeing feral orks and had stopped to deal with them. Their chainsword blades were dark red with ork blood.

‘Did I serve you well, master?’

Tarryn was close enough to the chained man to hear his whisper and the inquisitor’s reply: ‘You served me well.’

‘You will sever another link of the chains that bind me.’ This time, it wasn’t a question. A cloud scudded across Inquisitor’s Halstron’s rude features, but he inclined his head and confirmed that, yes, he would honour his promise.

The chained man’s eyes flashed again, and Tarryn detected the ghost of a smile on his lips. ‘Then, today I am content, with the knowledge that one day I shall be free of this prison of cloying flesh.’

The words sent a chill down the Relictor’s spine.

Priority level: Magenta Alpha

Transmitted: Imperial Command HQ, Hive Helsreach, Armageddon Secundus

To: Adeptus Astartes battle-barge *Blade of Vengeance*, Armageddon High Orbit

Date: 3025999.M41

Transmitter: Astropath Prime Childessa

Receiver: Astropath-terminus Xhian-Ji

Author: General Vladimir Kurov, commander of the Armageddon Steel Legion and head of the ruling military council

Thought for the Day: Honour your Chapter.

Lord Commander. It dismays me to learn that a distress call from my 93rd Regiment, stationed at Hive Infernus, appears to have been disregarded by you. I am assured that, without the urgent reinforcement of the Adeptus Astartes, the city will likely fall. I trust that this is merely an oversight on your part and that the matter will be hastily rectified. I am sure you will agree that naught else takes precedence over the defence of our population centres. Cordially yours.



NINE

They found Sergeant Juster where they had left him.

His weapons, including his venerable chainsword, had been stripped from him. The feral orks had tried to take his armour too, but had only succeeded in hammering it out of shape. They had killed him, of course.

Baeloch led the way from there to the ambush site. He went a little way ahead of his battle-brothers, scanning for more traps before each step.

Nabori and Kantus were also dead and their bodies picked clean. The orks had managed to pry off Nabori's helmet, though it would do them little good on its own.

'This is wrong.'

The voice in Tarryn's helmet startled him. Baeloch had used their combat squad's frequency, however, so the others – the captain and his command squad – couldn't hear him. At least, he hoped they couldn't.

He reminded his brother of what Maegar always said. 'To question is to doubt and doubt is the—'

'We must ever be alert for the signs of treachery,' Baeloch countered. 'Yes, even and especially in those who are closest to us.'

The captain had taken the inquisitor aside for a private conference. He had removed his helmet to reveal a cracked, leathery face shaded with dark stubble. As the company commander, he had access to all vox-frequencies. He might well have been listening to Tarryn and Baeloch through an earpiece.

He kept it to himself if he was; he didn't spare a glance towards them. However, the chained man, who was standing beside his master with his head

bowed, looked up suddenly, as if sensing eyes upon him. Tarryn turned away from him, quickly.

They took their blades to the already-trampled undergrowth.

On their captain's orders, they hacked, tore and stamped out a square metre of flat ground, into which the inquisitor lowered his weighty frame.

Sitting cross-legged, with the chained man at his shoulder, he produced a small bundle of black cloth from inside his robes. He began to unwrap it, fastidiously. Six Relictors, Tarryn included, craned to see what the cloth contained.

The seventh, however, clapped a hand on Tarryn's arm and the other on Baeloch's. 'A word,' said Sergeant Divolio.

He led the pair of them away from the others. In the shade of a thin, crooked tree with helical purple leaves, he rounded on them. 'Clearly,' he said, 'you have both seen more than you were meant to see.'

'Yes, sergeant,' agreed Tarryn, because it was all he could think of to say.

'You would have been made privy to these matters in time,' the sergeant continued. 'One day, when you were ready to understand.'

Baeloch found his voice. 'I have served almost forty years in this company.'

'You will know, then, that we serve the Emperor well.'

'I know the reason for our penitent crusade,' insisted Baeloch. 'I know of the sin that stains our Chapter's name and for which we must still atone.'

'Some of us believe it was no sin,' said Divolio, quietly. He had chosen to keep his helmet on, so Tarryn couldn't see his expression. Did he look guilty or ashamed of his actions, he wondered? Or was there an implied threat in his eyes?

'De Marche lost his head over it, all the same. And now what? Another heretic inquisitor takes his place? Another fanatic who consorts with daemonkind and allows the depravity of the warp to corrupt his soul?'

Divolio's tone remained calm. 'Inquisitor Halstron saved your lives, Baeloch – yours and Tarryn's – and pray that you never know the price he paid for it.'

'He had to sever a link of the daemon's chains,' said Tarryn, remembering what he had overheard.

Divolio looked at him, hesitated for a moment, then nodded. 'As we speak, he is risking his life, his sanity and, yes, his very soul, once more for the Emperor's sake. The inquisitor believes he can locate—'

A raw-throated scream drowned out his next words.

It had come from Halstron's direction. Divolio led Tarryn and Baeloch back to where the inquisitor sat, encircled by their battle-brothers. Apparently, now they

were ready to bear witness... His spine was rigid. His eyes had rolled back into his skull and his lips were foam-flecked, reminding Tarryn of the mad Guardsman they had encountered. He threw back his head, so fiercely that Tarryn thought his neck might break, and screamed again.

The black cloth lay spread across the inquisitor's knees, and cradled in it was a single twisted shard of obsidian. It began to glow, just faintly at first but then gradually more strongly, growing red and then white until it seemed like it would melt. The mere sight of the shard gave Tarryn a queasy feeling: the same one he always had around the chained man. He didn't doubt that the others felt it too.

'What is it?' Baeloch hissed.

'It's a remnant, a shard, of a powerful weapon,' Divolio answered him.

'A weapon of Chaos.'

'Any weapon is a tool in the hands of he who wields it. We bend the warp itself to our will every time we haul our sky fortress to a new star. We trust in our faith and in the Emperor's grace to shield us. Why should this be any different?'

'You said he was looking for something,' said Tarryn. 'Angron's Monolith?'

'The shard, it seems, is... connected to other parts of the same relic weapon. It led us here to Armageddon. The Chief Librarian's research—'

'Decario knows about this too?'

Divolio ignored Baeloch's interruption. 'He learned of rumours, that the jungle concealed an ancient shrine of diabolic power. It is said to have been erected by cultists of the daemon primarch, but its exact location is unknown. Anyone who ever saw the shrine – the monolith – was driven insane or worse.'

Tarryn nodded. That explained why the captain and the inquisitor had been so interested in the mad Guardsman. It also strengthened his fear that something – something in the jungle, not far from here – had been playing with his mind. 'We never actually saw any monolith,' he reminded Divolio.

'But you may have brought us close to it, closer than we have been before – close enough that the inquisitor can now—'

For the second time, Halstron interrupted the sergeant with a sound. This time, it was more a gasp than a scream, as if he had been punched in the stomach. He jerked forwards, then back again. His blind eyes stared up at the jungle canopy, while his mouth moved in fervent but silent prayer – to the Emperor, Tarryn hoped.

'What if he can't control it?' asked Baeloch.

Divolio nodded towards Captain Maegar. He stood behind the inquisitor, grim-faced, with one hand resting on his chainsword's activation rune. 'Then the

captain will honour the inquisitor's last wish and take his head.'

Halstron drew a great shuddering breath and his shoulders sagged. His eyes had cleared – they could see his pupils again now – and sweat poured from his face. The fiery glow of the shard in his lap dimmed and reluctantly died. He took a moment to steady himself, until Maegar loomed over him, impatiently.

'Well?' he prompted, tapping the grip of his blade.

Still breathless, the inquisitor recited a litany of purity. He stumbled over a few words, but still the captain seemed to be satisfied. He extended his sword hand towards Halstron and pulled him to his feet. 'Did you find it?' he asked.

'We were right,' the inquisitor murmured. 'It *is* close. The shard, it could sense the other part of itself, so strongly... And they want to be together. It was all I could do to...' He took another breath. 'I saw it. The monolith. It couldn't hide itself from... The shard, the other shard, is at the monolith and I *saw* it.'

'Can you lead us to it?' asked Maegar, eagerly.

Halstron nodded. The captain called for water for him, while Halstron called for his aide. The chained man whispered something in the inquisitor's ear as his master leaned on him. Tarryn couldn't make it out, but he had no problem imagining the words: *You should have let me do it. You had no need to risk yourself – I could have found your lost treasure for you. It would only have cost you one more link...*

What would have happened to the chained man, Tarryn wondered, if his master had gone mad, if the captain had been obliged to kill him?

What would have become of the inquisitor's daemon, then?

Captain Maegar summoned Tarryn and Baeloch to him.

He had asked them again what had happened when they approached the monolith, though they could tell him no more than they had already relayed.

He glanced up at the darkening sky. It had been a long day, he considered, and eager as he was to press on and claim the prize that now lay within his reach, perhaps it would be wise on this occasion to exercise prudence.

They would return to base camp, he decided. They would recall the rest of their combat squads to join them. Then, tomorrow, the full complement of the Relictors Fourth Company would descend upon this area in force, and let the jungle try to keep its secrets from them.

They carried their dead back with them. The Techmarines and Apothecaries of their Chapter would want to salvage what they could, the precious gene-seed, their armour and their weapons. Tarryn and Baeloch carried Juster between

them. Baeloch, for once, held his tongue, which Tarryn was glad about.

Today, he had discovered a conspiracy – many would say, a heresy – that extended to his Chapter’s highest echelons. He had watched as his captain, on whose orders he would have given his life gladly, had trucked with the forces of Chaos; he had listened while a respected sergeant justified such forbidden rituals to him.

He had learned a dark truth about Relictors history too. The name ‘de Marche’ had not been entirely new to him, but Baeloch had revealed much about the ‘traitor priest’ that he had not known, details he had never been told.

Tarryn knew his duty. *We must ever be alert for the signs of treachery.* He ought to report all he had seen – but to whom? And wasn’t it also his duty to honour his Chapter and therefore its leaders? *Remember, to question is to doubt and doubt is the bane of faith.* He had never felt so confused, so unsure of the right path to take. He had never before doubted that he knew what the Emperor required of him.

Tarryn needed time to think.



TEN

It had been some time since Decario had travelled in a drop pod. His duties as Chief Librarian, and the keeper of the Relictors' secrets, kept him from the battlefield more often than he would have liked.

The Armageddon skies, however, were perilous – even at the equator – and the safest way to reach the planet's surface was also the fastest way. So, Decario found himself huddled inside a bullet-shaped capsule, sitting across from Chapter Master Bardane and the four members of his honour guard.

He felt the retro-thrusters firing, barely taking the edge off their plummeting speed. He braced himself for the inevitable impact, which sent a shock through his bones despite being largely absorbed by his battlesuit of Terminator armour.

He climbed out of the pod behind the others, treading earth beneath his boots for the first time in over two years. His auto-senses noted the oppressive warmth of the jungle, even though the sun had set, and his armour adjusted its internal temperature accordingly.

They had flattened their own landing site: another benefit of drop pod travel. Their violent arrival would have drawn attention, however. They had put down a short way to the north-east of the Fourth Company's base camp. Veteran Brother Parvhel led them on their way towards it, following the auspex in his helmet.

Bardane kept his helmet on too, and said nothing as they marched. He had tucked the screaming flail into his belt, where it was hidden by a sweeping grey and black cloak and breechcloths.

Sergeant Illonus had likewise concealed his black-bladed gladius, though this was a comparatively minor artefact. In contrast, Captain Harkus wore his

double-headed dreadaxe in plain sight. There was nothing about its aspect, fortunately, that betrayed the weapon's appetite for condemned souls.

The Chapter Master was brooding, thought Decario. He had crossed a line from which there was no turning back. He wasn't the type to entertain regrets – not for his own decisions – but then, nor was he one to break a sacred oath lightly. There would certainly be consequences for the decisions he had taken today, and not only for him but his entire Chapter. But whatever they were, he would face them.

Decario would have to face those consequences too. It was he who had advised his Chapter Master to disobey orders. He had sworn that such was the Emperor's will. Had he offered Bardane another option, he knew he would have taken it gladly. They had to have the shard, though; his dreams had been clear on that point.

Will they take his head as well? the Librarian wondered. Will they drag him to the axe man's block as they did de Marche? Will I have to bear that additional weight on my conscience? Or, this time, will they drag me to the block alongside him?

They met a pair of sentries at the edge of the camp. The Space Marines snapped to attention and saluted the Chapter Master as he passed. They must have voxed their captain too, because Maegar emerged from his command centre to greet his visitors.

He led them into the prefabricated building. A handful of his closest aides were present, Inquisitor Halstron among them. For once, the inquisitor was without his pale shadow. He had left his bound daemonhost chained up in his transport ship, he explained when Bardane questioned him.

Captain Maegar proceeded to update them on recent events, giving them the news they had been praying for. 'The inquisitor divined the monolith's bearing and distance,' he revealed. He activated a holoprojector and a bright map of the jungle appeared, floating in the air between them. He enlarged a sector of it and pointed to a skull icon in the middle of a largely uncharted area.

'There it is,' he announced, proudly: at long last, the object of their quest.

There were strategies to be discussed then, by the captain and the Chapter Master, primarily. Decario left them to it, as he was keen to talk to Inquisitor Halstron. They exchanged formal pleasantries. Halstron had a genial enough manner, at least on the surface, which only made Decario all the less inclined to trust him.

As soon as formality allowed, he asked to see the shard – the one that had been loaned to him from the Relictors Vault. He wanted to be reassured that it was safe. The inquisitor obliged him, unwrapping his bundle of black cloth to display the precious artefact without touching it.

Decario hadn't trusted any member of the Inquisition fully, not since de Marche. Halstron had arrived at the sky fortress, however, with a gift he couldn't resist: the knowledge of where a third shard might be located. Nor could he have presented himself at a more propitious time.

He belonged to a radical faction of the Ordo Malleus, as had de Marche. They followed the teachings of the long-dead Inquisitor Lord Xanthus, believing that the power of Chaos could never be truly vanquished but might be harnessed. Xanthus had been executed for his heresies eight thousand years ago. De Marche had been fond of saying that it was easy enough to destroy a man, but near impossible to destroy an idea.

'There are many of us now,' he had told Decario once, 'more than you might imagine. We are... well, if not exactly tolerated, not in official quarters, then at least a blind eye might be turned to some of our activities.'

The Xanthite way yielded results, de Marche had boasted, and few were wont to argue with results, no matter the risks taken to achieve them. 'Doesn't the Emperor tell us, after all, that the ends always justify the means?'

A month after making that pronouncement, de Marche had been dead. His name had been struck from the Imperial records, his immortal soul condemned to an eternity of torment. Evidently, a blind eye could only be turned so far.

Captain Maegar asked to see Decario after the conference.

He reported that two brothers in his company – two of the uninitiated – had learned about the monolith and had seen Inquisitor Halstron's daemonhost in action.

Decario absorbed the news with equanimity. This had happened before and it would certainly happen again. He asked for the brothers' names and said he would speak to them tonight.

'I've had a close watch kept on them,' the captain assured him. 'We may have a problem with one of them.'

The Librarian examined both the Relictors in question. 'Baeloch,' he surmised.

'A fine warrior,' said Maegar.

'I don't doubt it, and a pious one too. His heart is filled with blood and thunder.'

‘In another Chapter, he might have made a capable leader.’

They had talked about inducting Baeloch into the Conclave, once. He had been entrusted with some of the Relictors’ smaller secrets, to test his reaction. ‘He wasn’t ready,’ said Decario. ‘Some of them never are.’ *How ready was I*, he asked himself, *for the secrets I was forced to learn?*

‘What of Tarryn?’ he asked.

‘He is still young,’ Maegar answered him.

‘Indeed he is. Open-minded too, I think.’ In other company, that might have been regarded as a heinous insult.

Maegar considered the point and nodded. ‘He has doubts.’

‘Naturally he does,’ agreed Decario. ‘It’s been a century and a half since I picked up that damned daemon weapon and still I doubt the path I chose then – the path I have guided this Chapter along – every day and every night.’

‘Doubt is the bane of–’ began Maegar.

Decario interrupted him. ‘If it weren’t for my actions, we would still be Fire Claws. We would still have our world. Don’t you think I should doubt myself occasionally?’

‘The Emperor chose our path for us,’ said the captain.

‘And yet, many would swear that I have misinterpreted His wishes. It is through my doubts, captain – because I question myself every day and seek answers to those questions – that I muster the courage I need to tread that path.’

‘As you say, Chief Librarian,’ Maegar conceded, gruffly.

Decario sighed. ‘I had high hopes for Brother Tarryn. I felt we might be able to share our secrets with him, once he was older, wiser and more experienced. His eyes weren’t meant to see so much, so soon. I pray it won’t set his heart against us.’

He received the two Relictors in the crew compartment of an Aquila lander, where they could talk in private.

They stood before him stiffly. Baeloch’s face was stony and he wouldn’t meet Decario’s probing gaze. The younger Tarryn’s expression was equally guarded, but his eyes were more open.

How many did this make, the Librarian wondered? How many like them had he had to face? *How many more times must I explain myself?* Still, he couldn’t – and would never – delegate this duty to a subordinate. This was part of his penance.

So, he confessed the existence of the Conclave to them: a sacred trust of

Relictors who guarded their Chapter's deepest secrets. He told them that they shared some of those secrets now, and so were a part of that sacred trust too, sworn never to reveal what they had learned. He might well have added, *whether you like it or not*.

For the first time, Baeloch looked him in the eye. 'What would the masters of the Ordo Hereticus say, if they saw what we have seen today? If you truly believe that you are doing the Emperor's will, why then must your deeds be cloaked in silence and shadow? Why not confess your actions before the Inquisition and suffer their judgement?' Tarryn shifted uncomfortably beside him.

He is bitter, thought Decario, apart from any other reason, because he wasn't entrusted with this knowledge earlier. Baeloch had cursed the late Inquisitor de Marche's name ten years ago, for bringing disgrace upon his Chapter. Would he curse Decario's name as vehemently now?

The Chief Librarian lowered his heavy, armoured form into a seat. There was so much he couldn't tell them, so much they weren't ready to hear; and though Tarryn might yet have trusted blindly, Baeloch was clearly beyond that. He had to make them understand. 'I want to tell you – the two of you – a story,' said Decario.

'It's an old tale, but younger than I am. It dates back a century and a half, to when I was an Epistolary in a Chapter still known as the Fire Claws. It begins with a ship that dropped out of the warp and drifted into the Stygies System. The ship was a space hulk, known as the *Captor of Sin...*'

It was going to be a long night.



ELEVEN

Captain Maegar assembled the Fourth Company in front of his command centre.

Tarryn had wondered how much he would choose to tell them. He revealed that an unusual artefact had been discovered, but little more than that. Tarryn's eyes roved over the rigid grey and black figures around him. *How many of them already know the truth?* he asked himself. Not many, he suspected.

Few of his battle-brothers would ever know what they had fought for in this sweltering jungle. Fewer still would ever ask. He wondered what they would think if he told them. How many would turn a blind eye?

The plan was straightforward enough. The company's sixteen combat squads – some had been amalgamated, to bring them up to full strength after taking casualties – would march south-east, towards the artefact's assumed position. They would fan out and surround it, and hopefully draw out any feral orks in its vicinity.

A small elite force of Relictors, comprising Maegar's command squad and Chapter Master Bardane and his honour guard, would wait until the inevitable skirmishes were in progress. Then they would strike out directly towards their prize – and, with the Emperor's grace, encounter minimal resistance along the way.

Decario addressed the troops next. He reminded them to be vigilant against the subtler wiles of Chaos, and he led them in chanted litanies of purity and protection.

Brothers Tarryn and Baeloch had been reassigned. Sergeant Divolio had already given them their posting. They were to join the captain's command

squad, and would therefore be fighting beside the Chapter Master himself.

Baeloch's reaction had been predictable. 'They want to keep us close,' he had grumbled. 'They fear we may not keep their sordid secrets.'

They reported to Divolio dutifully, and waited with the command squad as the others filed out of the clearing ahead of them. Tarryn's stomach tightened as Chapter Master Bardane joined them. He towered over the other Relictors, a palpable presence in his highly decorated artificer armour.

A day ago, he would have considered it a signal honour to serve in his leader's presence. *It is an honour*, he told himself firmly, *one of which I must strive to be worthy*. Bardane's standard-bearer was unfurling his banner – *I am marching into battle beneath my Chapter's banner!* – and that still stirred something, a fierce sense of pride, in his primary heart.

'Do we serve the Emperor today?'

Baeloch was voxing him privately again. Apparently, their old squad's frequency was still active. Tarryn answered him confidently. 'Yes. I believe we do.'

He was still conflicted about much of what he had learned, but one thing he didn't doubt. 'I believe the Chief Librarian was sincere, in any case. He believes we are doing the Emperor's bidding, and so who are we to question it?'

'Decario is toying with forces he doesn't understand,' Baeloch retorted, 'and what happens once they overwhelm him?'

'That is why the Conclave exists: to keep vigilance against—'

'But their minds have touched the warp too, and there is always a price for that. What if it is Maegar who succumbs to the corruption of Chaos – or Bardane himself? What if they have already succumbed?'

Tarryn protested loyally, but Baeloch cut him off again. 'They could lead us into the Eye of Terror itself, as de Marche would have done, and who would raise a hand to stop them? Who among us would dare question our orders, before it was too late and our Chapter was burning?'

Tarryn wanted to say, *It won't happen. Our leaders, Artekus Bardane especially, are strong, incorruptible*. But Inquisitor Halstron had strolled up to join their gathering, with the chained man in tow, and Tarryn remembered orks bursting into flames and a hand extended towards a battle-brother.

He remembered the stink of Chaos, a flash of daemon eyes, and for the hundredth time, he felt his certainties crumbling into sand between his fingers.

I believe we are serving the Emperor.

By rights, their outward journey ought to have been uneventful. They passed only through areas of the jungle already cleared – and in force, an entire Adeptus Astartes company, enough to make any foe think twice about crossing their path.

In the space of one night, however, those areas had been recolonised.

The squads at the company's vanguard took the brunt of frequent feral ork attacks. One sergeant remarked ruefully, over an open vox-channel, that the greenskins were multiplying faster than the Relictors could kill them.

It wasn't long before Tarryn's squad was attacked too.

The orks came at them from the west. The Relictors could hear them before they even registered on their auspexes. What they didn't expect was for a missile to come streaking towards them out of the jungle. It was badly aimed, however, and thudded into an intervening tree.

Around ten orks were bearing down on them, whooping eagerly. At their rear, an oversized brute dropped onto one knee, cradling a crude rocket launcher. It was greenskin technology, unmistakably, but whether it had been stolen from the invaders, salvaged from the previous war or lashed together by the jungle-dwellers themselves, Tarryn could not tell.

Another missile erupted from the launcher's black maw. It flew directly at the Chapter Master's head; he just managed to duck beneath it. The rest of the orks were crashing towards Bardane too, barrelling past other potential targets between them. They must have identified him as their enemies' leader.

His honour guard intercepted over half of them, but that still left Bardane being rushed by four feral orks – and they only had to keep him pinned long enough for the next rocket to hit him. The rest of the Relictors, Tarryn included, hastened to his side. Bardane, however, had drawn a weapon from underneath his cloak.

At first, it looked to Tarryn like a simple flail, and he wondered why a Chapter Master would wield such an unremarkable tool. He should have known better, as he realised just half a second later.

As Bardane drew back the flail, the tips of its spiked chains flared. Suddenly, there was a shrunken daemon's head upon each of them, formed out of roiling energy. Three shrunken faces contorted in anger and pain – and the daemons were *screaming*.

The sound was like a rusty blade sawing at Tarryn's nerves, but this was nothing compared to the flail's effect on its victim. Its chains lashed across the first feral ork's shoulder, cutting it to the bone, while the daemon heads

burrowed deep beneath its tattered flesh, snapping their teeth like tiny carnivorous fish.

Bardane whipped the flail back around and slashed the same ork across the chest on his backhand. It was doubtful whether this second strike was even necessary. The feral ork's thick legs splayed out underneath it and it smacked into the ground, a bloody carcass with its face frozen into an expression of horror.

Its fate gave the other orks pause for just a moment, long enough for Bardane to wrench one of them into the path of the next, and final, missile. As the hapless creature died, so too did its inadvertent slayer. Tarryn charged the ork with the rocket launcher and carved it up before it could reload again.

After that, the rest of the feral orks fell quickly.

Bardane stood over the last of them, with his head bowed and his daemon flail clutched in both hands. He did not move until its angry screams subsided and its energy-formed faces guttered and spat and finally flickered out, receding back from whence they had been summoned. Then, he lifted his chain, tucked the weapon back into his belt and nodded to Captain Maegar, who gave the order to proceed.

'We christened it the Artekus Scourge.' Decario was suddenly looming over Tarryn's shoulder, apparently having read his mind – though that wouldn't have been hard in the circumstances. 'It is one of the most valuable relics we possess and has turned the tide of more battles than either of us could count in the Emperor's favour.'

They returned to the site of the ork massacre. Tarryn knew when they were approaching it because the stink from the untended bodies was riper than ever.

Decario had fallen into step alongside him. He spoke to Tarryn quietly, telling him of a great victory won by Artekus Bardane over the Chaos cult of the Scarlet Vein. He had heard the tale before – of how Bardane had been the battle's sole survivor and was named Chapter Master by his dying predecessor – but only the edited version.

Bardane would have died on that fateful day too, Decario assured him, had he not been wielding the Artekus Scourge. The daemons in the flail had shredded the cultists' souls and ultimately devoured them.

They passed by the area where Tarryn's old squad had been ambushed, where his battle-brothers had perished. Shortly afterwards, the other squads peeled away to the left and right ahead of them.

For the first time, now, they were ploughing into virgin jungle. Thirteen Relictors remained: the captain and his command squad, the Chapter Master and his honour guard, Decario, Baeloch and Tarryn – and then, there was Inquisitor Halstron, too, and his chained prisoner.

How many more of them had weapons like the flail, Tarryn wondered? Was Captain Maegar's chainsword possessed by daemons – or Captain Harkus's axe? And what of Angron's Monolith itself? Decario had had little enough to say about that, only revealing that it was a source of incredible power. *Unholy power.*

They took the same precautions that Sergeant Juster had taken a day earlier. They kept their eyes on their instruments, making sure they didn't wander off course. They had regular sound-offs. They focused on maintaining the barriers around their minds. If the jungle – the monolith lurking in the jungle, rather – tried to turn them around again, they would know about it before they had taken two steps.

They proceeded slowly, allowing the combat squads in front of them to fan out. The furthest two were already out of vox-range and their regular reports had to be relayed to Captain Maegar by squads in between them. When the first ork was sighted, and the first squad came under attack to the east of the monolith's supposed location, the Chapter Master immediately raised a hand to halt their procession.

Tarryn waited and listened for further developments. Another fight soon broke out to the west, and then another. The plan was working.

Above his head, the Chapter standard rippled in the late-morning breeze. He raised his eyes to it, willing it to stir him again. But pride and duty were at war with the black forces of doubt in his hearts. *Doubt is the bane of faith.*

The white skull on black had been everything to him before. It had represented the ideals to which Tarryn had devoted his life. When he looked at it now, he felt as if the skull were mocking him. Its ideals had been lies.

He asked himself what that banner represented to him now. He prayed to the Emperor for an answer, but no answer came.

Priority level: Magenta Alpha

Transmitted: Imperial Command HQ, Hive Infernus, Armageddon Secundus

To: Adeptus Astartes battle-barge *Blade of Vengeance*, Armageddon High Orbit

Date: 3026999.M41

Transmitter: Astropath Prime Rankor

Receiver: Astropath-terminus Xhian-Ji

Author: Commissar Marco Rickarius, 93rd Armageddon Steel Legion

Thought for the Day: An open mind is like a fortress with its gate unbarred and unguarded.

Ghazghkull is here. I repeat, I have confirmation that the ork warlord is leading the siege of Infernus personally. His assembled forces outnumber ours twenty to one. He has called down orbital strikes to shatter our anti-siege cannons. We have rioting on all hive levels. Many citizens have fled into the wastelands, despite the efforts of the local arbiters to stop them. The orks have slaughtered most of them. We cannot hold these walls for much longer. I beseech you, in the name of the Emperor, save us.



TWELVE

The monolith was immediately ahead of them.

They couldn't see it yet, but they knew it was there. Apart from anything else, Tarryn could feel it. The mere presence of such a powerful Chaos totem caused his stomach to turn over and a dull ache to build behind his eyes.

It had had a physical effect on the surrounding flora, too. Much of it was blistered, blackened and withered by sickness. Vines were oozing yellow pus.

Bloody battles were raging through the jungle around them; they could hear the sounds of some of them in the mid-distance. The vox-net was alive with reports from squad leaders. For every enemy they killed, they swore that three more came at them through the brush, wielding ever more advanced weaponry.

Already, three squads had had to join up with three others, to reinforce them.

They were winning, though. They were keeping the feral orks at bay. Better yet, they were keeping them busy. The auspexes read approximately eighty greenskins still standing guard over the monolith itself. Still, eighty was a good deal better than eight hundred or eight thousand, and against thirteen Space Marines and an inquisitor, it amounted to reasonable odds.

That was unless the orks were drawing power from the monolith itself. If only a handful of them were weirdboyz – like the one that had blasted Tarryn and his brothers four days ago – it might well tip the balance.

We are wielding the powers of the warp ourselves, he remembered. He didn't know if that made him feel better or worse.

They let the feral orks come to them – they had made enough noise to attract them – and greeted them with a blizzard of bolter fire. They cut down a few, but

the rest knew how to use the trees and their wounded for cover.

Bardane yelled out the Relictors war cry, ‘Strength of will, courage of will!’, but his words were drowned out by the feral orks’ howls and the activation sputters and roars of almost a dozen chainswords. Tarryn might have released a deep-throated roar as well, as the greenskin wave crashed over him.

There was no more room for doubt, then; not as long as he could look into his enemies’ eyes and see the murderous madness within them; not as long as he could hear the vile blasphemies that tripped off their slavering tongues.

Not as long as the enemy’s foul xenos stink was in his nostrils.

These creatures were obscenities in the Emperor’s sight, and for that they deserved to be eradicated. So, every time Tarryn slashed a feral ork with his chainsword blade or punched a hole through one of them with his bolter – every time he drew dark crimson xenos blood – he was doing the Emperor’s will. How could it be otherwise?

His battle-brothers were doing the Emperor’s will too, and mostly with the tools He had provided them with. He could hear the screaming of the Artekus Scourge, however, even when he couldn’t see it; and he was always aware of the chained man’s presence behind him, thanks to the constant prickling across the back of his neck.

Whenever Tarryn could risk it, he glanced over his shoulder to check what the inquisitor’s prisoner – *a bound daemonhost*, Decario had called him – was doing.

In fact, he wasn’t doing much. He stood apart from the battle, apparently content to watch. He wore his hood up and his hands were tucked into the sleeves of his dark robes. Whereas before feral orks had fled at the sight of him, this time they hardly spared him a glance at all.

He’s waiting, waiting for the inquisitor to break another link of his chains, thought Tarryn. *Until then he refuses to act. He won’t even defend himself.*

It was left to Halstron, then, to protect his prisoner, and he was making an admirable job of it. He was showing the steel that lay beneath his mild facade. He was stronger than he looked. His hammer, swung two-handed, shattered bone and pulverised muscle wherever it struck.

Halstron was fast too – faster than his heavy build and even heavier weapon had led Tarryn to expect. At one point, he took on a trio of opponents at once. He ducked and leaped and twisted out of the way of their ungainly lunges, and answered each of them with a crippling hammer blow.

The next time Tarryn looked, the three orks were on the ground, broken. The

inquisitor stood over them, his face shiny and red with perspiration. He raised his hammer to deliver the crushing, killing blow to the first of them, and Tarryn glimpsed a spark of madness in his eyes to rival that of the xenos themselves.

Chief Librarian Decario fought with a chainsword and a force staff. The latter was almost as tall as its wielder was, crowned with the Relictors skull symbol against the Imperial eagle in burnished bronze. When Decario brandished it, lightning arced from the eyes of the skull and the eagle both, racing towards his target.

The touch of any of the bolt's three forks could deprive a feral ork of a hand or a leg below the knee. A triple-pronged strike could blast its victim to ashes.

The staff likely had no power of its own, however. It was simply a conduit for Decario's natural abilities. Like all Librarians, he was a psyker and could bend the unholy energies of the warp to his will. He had grown to adulthood and been trained by the Adeptus Astartes to control his curse, unlike the thousands of other young psychic mutants, carried away by the Black Ships to face an uncertain fate.

There were other Librarians in the Relictors Chapter, more in almost every fortress-monastery across the Imperium. Their presence was tolerated – no, more than that, they were relied upon – and the same was true of the Imperium's Navigators and astropaths. As Sergeant Divolio had asked, *Why should this be any different?* Perhaps he had been right, after all.

If Decario, or the Chapter Master or Inquisitor Halstron, had the strength and courage of will to pick up a daemon weapon and turn its power back against the Emperor's enemies, then how could that be anything but a good thing?

And that power *was* making a difference.

The feral orks' front line had crumpled. A third of them were down already, without having confirmed a kill between them. As Tarryn had feared, however, they had psykers lurking among them. The first of them was foolish enough to trade lightning bolts with the Chief Librarian and quickly ceased to be a problem.

The second was more cunning, hiding in the midst of its own forces. Tarryn could barely see it from where he stood, but vox-reports from his brothers kept him informed of its actions. They said that whip-like energy tendrils emerged from the psyker's head. Instead of punishing its enemies, however, the tendrils brushed against its brutish allies and imbued them with redoubled strength and ferocity.

Tarryn witnessed the truth of this himself, as an ork he had wounded and left

to die found its second wind and set about him viciously with its club.

For a moment, it seemed the tide of battle might turn. The feral orks, however, were too badly diminished to capitalise on their late advantage. Captain Maegar rallied his command squad to smash through their defences and took the psyker's head himself.

Tarryn's opponent, so bold a moment ago with its sorcerous edge, remembered that it was losing blood and wilted. A moment later, it lost its life too.

From then on, the battle could more rightly have been termed a slaughter. To the feral orks' credit, none of them tried to run. They fought and died instead. By the end, Tarryn's chainsword had six more kills to add to its story, and he had wounded at least two orks in addition, which his battle-brothers had finished off. In such exalted company, he considered that he had held his own.

Behind him, Inquisitor Halstron had fallen to his knees. He looked like he had at the ambush site last night: exhausted, not just from his outward exertions but from some titanic inner struggle. *The obsidian shard*, Tarryn realised.

Chief Librarian Decario hurried to him, knelt awkwardly beside him and spoke to him quietly. Tarryn couldn't hear his voice, but he saw Halstron respond with a fierce shake of the head. 'I can control it,' he insisted. 'My mind... my mind is strong and I have faith in the Emperor. I *will* control it!'

Maegar sent two Relictors to help the inquisitor to stand. Tarryn hadn't known the man long, but it struck him in that moment that he looked older than he had, older and more weary.

He concentrated on his own wargear, making urgent repairs to his cracked and battered power armour. He spared a glance for Baeloch, who had fought as fiercely and as well as any battle-brother had despite his evident misgivings. He had nothing to say about it now, though. When Tarryn tried to talk to him, he responded only with a sullen grunt.

A wounded ork stirred in the trampled undergrowth, straining to reach its dropped weapon. Captain Harkus swung his double-bladed axe and cleaved it through the stomach. Tarryn thought he heard the exuberant cackling of daemonic voices, though he might well have imagined it. Chapter Master Bardane had returned his flail to his belt, but its terrible screams still echoed in Tarryn's head.

We won the battle, he told himself. *We destroyed the Emperor's enemies and that is all that matters. The ends justify the means.*

They had won, and it was time to reap the fruits of victory.

Captain Maegar sent two battle-brothers ahead of them, to scout the final few

strides between them and their prize. It took them longer than expected to report back to him, and Tarryn feared, illogically, that the jungle might have swallowed them whole.

By now, the Relictors had patched up their armour, their weapons and their wounds, and had formed up into lines again, ready and eager to advance. They waited in silence until, finally, the vox-net crackled with a hushed voice. 'It's here. We've found it.'

Tarryn's brothers celebrated that announcement, but in a muted way, it seemed to him. Like him, they were wary of what still lay ahead of them.

Chapter Master Bardane remained silent. He ordered his force forward with a gesture, and Tarryn fell into step among his brothers, although his stomach and his legs alike felt heavy. He kept his head down and took one step after another. Almost before he knew it, he had emerged into a large, round clearing, from which the jungle seemed to have shrunk in revulsion.

And, at last, there it stood before him...



THIRTEEN

‘What can you see?’

Bardane had stationed his forces – all but for the Chief Librarian, the two captains and the inquisitor – around the edge of the clearing to stand sentry. He had watched as Decario and Halstron had circled their precious find, inspecting it from every angle.

It was Halstron who stopped before the south face of the edifice and indicated something above his head. Decario and Bardane joined him, and their eyes followed his pointing finger upwards. ‘Is that it?’ the Chapter Master asked. The Chief Librarian nodded and said that he believed it was.

From where he stood, on the monolith’s far side, Baeloch couldn’t see what was happening; hence his voxed question to Tarryn, who only had to turn his head.

Tarryn didn’t want to look at the thing in the centre of the clearing. At the same time, he found he couldn’t help himself. He felt as if a spell had been cast over him, one of dreadful fascination. More than once, he tore his gaze away determinedly, to prove that he could, and stared outwards into the jungle, but every time he looked back again.

The monolith stood about twelve metres tall, half that span long and wide. It was made up of dozens of mismatched blocks of stone, somehow fused together – by the energies of the warp itself, perhaps. Images had been carved inexpertly into those stones: of bloodied weapons, leering mutants and screaming daemons.

Tarryn recalled the mad Imperial Guardsman’s babblings, about glaring hateful eyes. Whenever he turned his back on the carved daemons, he was sure he could

feel their malevolent glares burning into him.

The monolith bristled with splinters of wood and metal, jammed into the gaps between the stones. They were remnants of weapons: the fractured, rusted blades of daggers, fragments of grenade casings, arrowheads, the mangled stock of an Imperial lasgun. The glint of a small red gem caught Tarryn's eye, and he saw that it was gripped in a ring of tarnished bronze, perhaps once a sword pommel.

The stones are bound together by hatred and blood, he thought. There was fresh blood on the monolith too, dark red, smeared across its eastern face, a recent offering.

'What can you see?' asked Baeloch through his earpiece again, more insistently. So, Tarryn told him. He told him about the long, glistening black sliver that Inquisitor Halstron had spotted, embedded in the monolith's side.

'How do we get it out of there?' asked Bardane. 'Is it safe to touch it?'

The inquisitor replied that certain rituals might weaken the monolith's grip upon the shard. He admitted, when pressed, that those rituals were both risky and time-consuming. There hadn't been a report from the Relictors combat squads in several minutes. That meant they were holding their own against the orks, keeping them from returning to the clearing and discovering the intruders here. Still, as Bardane pointed out bluntly – and Decario agreed – time was hardly on their side.

'I should have brought along a Techmarine,' the Chapter Master grumbled, 'with a claw arm on his servo-harness.'

'No, brute force alone won't suffice,' Decario advised him. 'The shard is embedded not only in the stone, but in the solidified substance of the warp itself. To release it, one must possess great strength of arms, yes, but also—'

'Strength of will, courage of will,' the Chapter Master summarised for him, brusquely. He turned to Halstron. 'Inquisitor?'

Halstron shook his head. 'I have wielded one shard of the artefact today and it near consumed me. I dare not handle a second. Nor would I advise you to do so while you still hold the flail.'

'Then the task falls to me, as I always knew it must,' Decario stated. 'I have kept my hands free and my mind clear for precisely this purpose.'

He took a small step forwards. In his armour, he was significantly taller than Halstron, and he had a longer reach. Unlike the inquisitor, he would be able to get to the shard easily.

'A monument built to a daemon primarch,' Baeloch snorted, 'for God-Emperor knows what purpose – what else do they need to know about it? We ought to

summon a battle-barge here and flatten this whole sector of the jungle. Destroy the monolith and keep its Chaos taint from spreading any further.'

Bardane instructed Decario to remove his helmet. 'I need to see your eyes,' he explained; and Tarryn recalled how, when Halstron had been in his shard-induced trance, Captain Maegar had stood by with his chainsword readied.

Tarryn was startled when he saw the Chief Librarian's face. Decario had served with the Chapter for hundreds of years, but before it had seemed that age had only strengthened him. Now, his skin had the pallor of old parchment, as if he had been sapped of his life's energy. When had that happened?

Decario planted his feet in front of Angron's Monolith. He raised his arms towards it until his gauntlets hovered over the obsidian shard. 'Try not to touch the stone,' the inquisitor cautioned him, though the warning was surely unnecessary.

Decario closed his eyes tightly and recited a prayer.

'What are they doing now?' Tarryn ignored Baeloch's impatient question. If the Chapter Master wanted him to know, he reasoned, he would have let him see.

In any case, it felt wrong to break the silence that had settled over the clearing, even with a voice that nobody else could hear. It felt to Tarryn like an uncommon, almost sanctified silence. In the heart of it, even the Chief Librarian's voice faded, although his dry lips continued to move.

Decario drew in a deep breath and grasped the shard with both hands.

His entire body stiffened and began to convulse. Bardane's hand went to his belt, but Decario brought the shaking under control. He breathed again. He ground his teeth, the veins in his cheeks bulging, as he pulled with all his strength; but the obsidian shard remained held by the stone, unmoveable.

After what seemed like an eternity of struggle, Decario's shoulders slumped and he breathed out heavily. His hands, however, remained stubbornly in position as he girded himself to try again. In a weak, raspy voice, he called for the inquisitor.

'I'm here,' said Halstron, at his shoulder.

'The shard... We were right,' Decario whispered. 'I can feel it, feel the shape of the artefact in my mind. I can feel it... feel its power.'

Halstron drew closer to him. 'Then it is as we thought?'

Decario nodded, eagerly. 'A shard... Another shard of Angron's axe.'

Tarryn felt his throat contracting. Had he heard that right? The shard – both shards, the one embedded in the monolith and the one in the inquisitor's cloth – they were fragments of a daemon prince's own weapon?

Decario's eyes snapped open, and suddenly they were burning with madness: the same as that with which the inquisitor had been afflicted earlier. He blinked and dampened the flames. 'We must... must have this...' he insisted, and he strained and pulled at the embedded shard again, to no avail.

'The shards are stronger in each other's presence,' said Halstron. He sounded concerned. 'I should take mine away.'

Decario's eyes had closed again. 'No. It is the Emperor's will that I master this relic. It will gift to me its strength, its own strength, the strength I need to work it loose and...' His voice trailed off and, for a long, agonising moment, he was still.

It was in that moment that the inquisitor turned to the chained man.

He was watching impassively, as always, that faint smile playing about his lips again as he met his master's gaze. Halstron set his jaw and turned away from him, to Tarryn's considerable relief. No doubt, the chained man could have plucked the shard with ease, but what terrible power might it have bestowed upon him?

Baeloch voxed him again. His voice sounded leaden. 'I have made a decision. I am sworn to honour our leaders, but I cannot – I will not – stand by as their actions stain our Chapter's name. I must do my duty to the Emperor.'

Tarryn didn't ask him what he meant by that. He held his tongue until Baeloch prompted him. 'Do you stand with me on this, Brother Tarryn?'

'No,' he said, without really knowing where the answer had come from.

It was a moment before Baeloch spoke again. 'Some would judge you a heretic too,' he said at length, 'because you knew what was happening and said nothing.'

'They may,' agreed Tarryn, but the prospect didn't worry him as perhaps it ought to have done. He was more than just a rank-and-file Space Marine now, as proud and noble a calling as that was. Sergeant Juster, in his final minutes of life, had entrusted him with an even higher duty.

'You share their secrets now, and will likely share their fate,' Baeloch warned. 'I won't be able to protect you.'

'You must do as you feel the Emperor wills,' said Tarryn, calmly. 'As I must too. I trust my leaders to speak with His voice and to hold strong against the corruption of Chaos. I trust the Chief Librarian to advise them wisely. I will honour my Chapter.'

Decario was clinging doggedly to the shard, but his eyes were still closed. He hadn't moved in almost a minute. Bardane gripped him by his shoulder. 'Open

your eyes,' he barked. 'Open your eyes and look at me. That's an order.'

The Librarian did as he was bidden, with some effort. Bardane snatched off his helmet and glared at Decario fiercely. 'We must have this artefact. That is what you told me, isn't it? That is what you have had me believe. We need the shard in our possession if we are to weather the tides to come. Our brothers have died for this, Decario. I sold our souls for this. Would you have all that be for nothing?'

Decario mumbled something that Tarryn couldn't hear.

The Chapter Master persisted, 'The Emperor chose your path for you, and He granted you all the strength you need to tread it. You have seen the bloody eye and divined the direful future it portends. You have the Emperor's strength in you and you must follow the path for His sake. For all our sakes.'

The sermon seemed to be having the desired effect.

Decario set his jaw grimly. He hauled his chin up to glower at the captive shard, his eyes ablaze as if fixed upon a mortal enemy. His muscles strained and his servo-motors howled as he made a third attempt to yank the shard free. And this time, at last, it gave a little, causing tiny chips of stone to break loose and skitter down the monument's side. Tarryn's hearts leapt in anticipation. *He's doing it*, he thought.

And then, Angron's Monolith *screamed*.

Priority level: Magenta Alpha

Transmitted: Imperial Command HQ, Hive Helsreach, Armageddon Secundus

To: Adeptus Astartes battle-barge *Blade of Vengeance*, Armageddon High Orbit

Date: 3029999.M41

Transmitter: Astropath Prime Childessa

Receiver: Astropath-terminus Xhian-Ji

Author: General Vladimir Kurov, commander of the Armageddon Steel Legion and head of the ruling military council

Thought for the Day: Nobody is innocent; there are merely varying levels of guilt.

Lord Commander. I must express my displeasure with the conduct of an Adeptus Astartes Chapter under your command. From your dispatches, it is clear that the Relictors have flagrantly disobeyed orders, to the detriment of our resistance efforts in the name of the Emperor. I have had to divert forces I can ill afford to spare from Hive Acheron to defend Hive Infernus, jeopardising the security of both cities. I name the Relictors and their Chapter Master, Artekus Bardane, as oath-breakers, and demand that they be called to account for their actions before a military tribunal. I trust I have your loyal support in this matter. I have copied my report to the Master of the Administratum on Holy Terra, for his edification.



FOURTEEN

It was a scream of unadulterated rage, and it hit Tarryn like a thunder hammer to the skull. The ache behind his eyes exploded and the world was washed in shades of red.

He adjusted his auto-senses to filter out the dreadful sound as best they could.

Chapter Master Bardane jammed his helmet back on, presumably having had the same thought. Chief Librarian Decario had let go of the shard – still embedded in the stone above his head, though its jagged edge protruded further now – and slid to the ground with an uncharacteristic howl. His ears were bleeding.

Inquisitor Halstron helped Decario on with his helmet. How he was still standing, Tarryn didn't know. Perhaps his shard was lending him strength again.

He made out voices now, too many of them talking at once: the voices of the combat squad leaders over the vox-net. They could hear the sound too, though they couldn't make out where it was coming from. One sergeant remarked that it sounded as if the earth itself were in agony.

They reported that the feral orks were on the run. Most of them had simply broken off their attacks, even where they had had the upper hand, and fled.

Chapter Master Bardane's voice interrupted the babble, his command channel automatically taking priority. He ordered his sentries to close around the monolith. Even as they did so, Tarryn heard footsteps coming towards them and, belatedly, realised the function of the monolith's scream. It was a call to arms.

He backed up almost to the monolith itself, with Sergeant Divolio to his left and Veteran Brother Parvhel to his right. 'Defend the Chief Librarian at all

costs,' Bardane bellowed, as the first feral orks poured into the clearing around them. *How could so many of them have made it back here so quickly?*

The Chapter Master drew the Artekus Scourge. Tarryn had to settle for his regular chainsword and bolter, but he knew how to use them and the weapons had acquired a taste for greenskin blood. He shook his head to clear it as he activated his blade.

With battle-brothers to either side of him and the monolith at his back, the feral orks could only get to him one or two at a time. That gave him the advantage over them, being stronger than any three of them.

He favoured his melee weapon, as he was beginning to run low on ammunition. He used his boltgun only when he had to: when his chainsword choked on knotted muscle tissue and he needed a moment to restart it.

He swung his blade, squeezed his trigger and weathered scores of axe and club blows in return. A lucky strike dented Tarryn's helmet; another one, moments later, split one of his pauldrons. He soon lost count of the number of opponents he had slain. Their bodies were piling up at his feet, yet it seemed that the number of xenos still fighting was only increasing.

The clearing was heaving with feral orks by now. They were snarling and howling and elbowing and trampling each other in their frenzy to reach their surrounded prey. *Where are they all coming from?* Tarryn wondered again. *And where is the rest of our company?* Bardane had summoned his scattered combat squads, but so far only one had made it here: they were firing into the greenskin pack from behind, but had had to fall back or risk being swarmed by them.

Divolio lobbed a frag grenade into the feral orks' ranks. As tightly packed as they were, the explosion wreaked carnage upon them. It also sent a heavy brute stumbling into Tarryn, almost knocking him off his feet. The vox-net was abuzz with confused reports from the combat squads. They had tried to follow the sounds of battle, rushing to their brothers' aid as they had been instructed; instead, they found themselves inexplicably lost in the jungle.

Halstron was still trying to haul Decario to his feet. He was urging him to reach for the obsidian shard again. At some point, he must have unleashed his bound daemonhost – their plight was certainly serious enough to warrant it – because the chained man had joined the melee, causing feral orks to combust with a flex of his fingers. *Another link broken...*

The orks didn't run from the chained man, this time. They were no longer afraid of him; either that or their fear was overridden by the scream of the monolith, the latter driving their hearts to beat harder, pumping white-hot fury

through their arteries.

Divolio was down.

It had happened in the blink of an eye. Tarryn hadn't even seen the blow that had felled him. He couldn't tell if the sergeant was unconscious or comatose or dead. All he knew was that where a moment ago he had had a battle-brother protecting his flank, there were now two feral orks

One hulking great beast, with a splinter of bone through its nose, pushed off from Divolio's prone form and descended on Tarryn from above. It brought a massive axe down, two-handed, in a shattering blow to Tarryn's wrist. He lost his grip on his chainsword, and his bolter chose that inopportune moment to run dry.

He only needed a second to reload. He didn't have it. The ork swung for his throat next; he barely managed to duck under its axe blade in time.

He had a gladius sheathed at his hip, in reserve. His right wrist, however, was broken and his fingers were numb. He had to drop his bolter and draw the short sword left-handed. He plunged it into the feral ork's stomach, up to the hilt, drenching his arm in its blood. The creature gave a step, with Tarryn's blade buried in its guts, drawing him after it. He twisted the blade, eliciting a howl from his opponent; but then he stumbled over Divolio's body, and the blood-slickened grip of the gladius slid out of his grasp too and he was unarmed.

Another feral ork slammed into him and sent him sprawling.

He could probably have caught himself had he not, at the crucial instant, felt a stab of anxiety about touching Angron's Monolith. He imagined the Chaos power it contained coursing through him, shrivelling his soul.

A club smashed into his side – the same spot at which he had been injured several days earlier, though the wound had healed by now – and suddenly, Tarryn was not just stumbling but falling. He glanced off the monolith on his way down, and it felt like stone, nothing more than normal stone.

He found himself on his back, in a heap at the monolith's base, with a cluster of orks looming over him. They were jostling for the honour of delivering the coup de grâce, which was all that was keeping him alive. Tarryn's closest brother, Parvhel, was battling his way towards him, but had no hope of making it in time.

He needed a weapon.

He fumbled for one with his left hand, his unbroken hand. His chainsword had to be lying close by, along with any number of clubs and axes in the rigid grips of the dead. His questing fingers found something like a blade, and closed

eagerly around it. It might have been his own gladius, but as he hefted it, he knew it wasn't. It was too short, for a start, and its balance was off.

Whatever he was holding, though, it was solid and its twisted edges were sharp. It would do for Tarryn's purposes – it was certainly better than nothing.

A feral ork lunged at him, intending to tear out his throat with its tusks. Instead, it was impaled on his new weapon. It died on top of him, with an expression of injured surprise. Tarryn planted a foot in the creature's stomach, and he thrust its corpse away from him into its thronged brethren.

He braced his shoulders against the monolith and pushed himself up onto his elbows and feet. The feral orks seemed to be moving in slow motion; by the time they came at him again, to his own surprise, he was standing and ready for them.

He swung his weapon twice before they could touch him. Its sharp edge opened the throat of his nearest attacker, spilled guts out of the next. A third feral ork aimed a clumsy axe blow at him, which Tarryn evaded with ease. Before the ork had even finished its swing, he had stabbed it through the heart.

It was only then, as he wrenched his weapon out of the dying ork's chest, that he saw what he was holding: an obsidian splinter, about a third of a metre long, scuffed and chipped and twisted. He was holding the shard from the monolith.

The shard of Angron's axe!

Tarryn ought to have been horrified. Deep down, a small part of him was. A larger part, however, was grateful. He didn't know where the shard had come from, how it had made it into his hand, but he would certainly have been dead without it.

He wasn't dead. Instead, he was slaughtering the enemies of the Emperor, the xenos scum that had dared infest this Imperial world. It must have been the Emperor Himself who had brought the shard to him so that Tarryn could do His holy work.

Two feral orks rushed him at once, from either side. He handed off the one to his right, hardly noticing the bones grinding in his wrist and a lance of pain shooting up his right arm. The ork to his left howled and bled as the jagged point of Tarryn's shard slashed it across the eyes.

He remembered the Chief Librarian's words last night: *'When I picked up the Excoriator's sword,'* he had mumbled reflectively, *'for all that I was afraid of, even sickened by, the power it possessed – for all I denied it to myself, for days and even months afterwards – in the heat of that moment, there was no doubt. I simply knew. I saw the path that the Emperor had chosen for me.'*

Tarryn knew, now, exactly what Decario had meant.

The monolith's rage was pounding in his head and the world was turning red again. He was stronger and faster than before, he was unstoppable, and he was doing the Emperor's will, so why question it? *To question is to doubt*, he thought, *and doubt is the bane of faith*. If he stopped to question what he was doing, he would die.

So, Tarryn embraced the rage and the redness and the weapon, the shard, clutched tightly in his hand, and he whispered a prayer to the Emperor, which built into a scream as he threw himself headlong into the battle and lost himself in it.



FIFTEEN

Tarryn. Brother Tarryn. Listen to me. Can you hear my voice?

Tarryn could hear it, but distantly, almost drowned out by the screaming in his head. The voice was urging him to do something, but he couldn't understand it.

There is only the Emperor. Say it with me.

He wished the voice would go away, stop bothering him. It was dragging him back to a place he didn't want to be. The voice spoke incessantly of faith and honour and duty, reminding him of a burden he thought he had finally lain down.

It was saying a name, reminding him of a man he had once known: *Tarryn. Nico Tarryn. Brother Tarryn.*

'There is only...' another voice rasped. He felt the words burning in his throat and bleeding over his lips and he recognised that this voice was his. 'There is only the Emperor, and He...' *He has chosen this path for me, the path I must tread, the path that leads towards the voice.*

Tarryn was on his knees – *When did I fall?* – in the jungle, with ugly black flowers sprouting up to his chest. His right wrist was throbbing and the scream in his head had suddenly ceased, silence rushing in to fill the void it had left. A fuzzy, pale shape hovered in front of him.

He blinked and recognised the grey face of Chief Librarian Decario. He was kneeling before Tarryn, hands outstretched towards him, an urgent plea in his eyes. 'You must let go of the artefact, Brother Tarryn,' he said quietly.

Tarryn gaped at him, blankly. He was sweating profusely in his armour.

The Librarian glanced down at Tarryn's hands, which were resting in his lap. His fingers were fastened around something sharp and black. It had cut through

the ceramite of his gauntlets and into his palms, deep enough to draw blood. He was plastered in blood, he suddenly realised, only some of it his own.

‘What happened?’ he whispered, hoarsely.

‘You heard the Chief Librarian, Tarryn,’ barked a familiar voice behind him. ‘Hand the artefact over to him. Now.’

Tarryn stiffened. ‘Yes, sir,’ he said, and he tried to lift his arms but his muscles ignored his commands. His stomach tightened. His Chapter Master had given him an order, but he hadn’t... he couldn’t...

Strength of will, courage of will, he told himself fiercely.

He closed his eyes and recited the words in his mind, tried to fill his head with them until there was nothing but the words. He felt Decario’s hands around his. They took hold of the shard. Somehow, though he couldn’t bring himself to hand it over, Tarryn managed to relax his fingers and let the shard be eased away from him.

A tidal wave of nausea broke over him, and he had to straighten his arms to catch himself as he pitched forwards. Runes flashed inside his helmet and his auto-injectors pumped a dizzying cocktail of stimulants into his bloodstream.

He was trembling; he couldn’t help himself.

He forced himself to raise his head, to look up, to find Bardane looming over him. The Chapter Master told him to remove his helmet, which he did. He glared into Tarryn’s eyes, his frown lines deepening. Then he nodded to Decario, approvingly, and turned away.

It was only as Bardane took his hand away from his belt that Tarryn realised it had been resting there.

Decario had wrapped the shard in a black cloth and lowered it into a small wooden chest, which he bound with iron chains. He bent forwards and placed a pair of steadying hands on Tarryn’s shoulders. ‘What do you remember?’

He remembered rage and hatred and blood and orks fleeing from his terrible wrath. He remembered the screaming in his head and his temples pounding fit to burst. He remembered his fingers gouging flesh from his enemies’ hides, and he remembered carving them up with his misshapen obsidian blade.

He didn’t remember leaving the clearing in which Angron’s Monolith stood, and yet somehow he was elsewhere in the jungle. Other members of the captain’s command squad stood around him, although Maegar himself wasn’t present.

Most of Bardane’s honour guard, including his standard-bearer, were here too. They were tending to fresh wounds. The bodies of several feral orks – and one

battle-brother – lay half buried in the undergrowth.

‘It was a long and hard-fought battle,’ said Decario, ‘and you fought longer and harder than any of us. You ploughed into the feral orks like a whirlwind. They couldn’t seem to lay a hand on you. You kept them in disarray, long enough for more combat squads to find us. You certainly shifted the odds in our favour.’

‘We beat them?’ asked Tarryn. ‘We won?’

‘They finally broke and tried to flee. You went against Captain Maegar’s orders and pursued them.’

‘No, I couldn’t have,’ he protested. He remembered, though, chasing the Emperor’s enemies through the jungle. He remembered how determined he had been to punish them for their sins, to see them dead. He didn’t remember being ordered to desist. He didn’t remember his captain being present at all, nor any of his battle-brothers.

‘I mustn’t have heard him,’ he ventured, ‘with the screaming in my ears.’

...but that can’t be right, because I would never have abandoned them, even if I were faster than the rest of them were, faster than the feral orks...

The Chief Librarian shook his head. ‘The monolith had fallen silent, by then. Had it not, I doubt the orks would have been able to run at all.’

But that isn’t possible, Tarryn wanted to argue, because the scream only ended a moment ago. He had still been able to hear it, he was sure, when he had caught up to his prey and sent the first of them crashing into the next, from behind. *Right here, he thought. That must have been right here,* though it felt like it had happened worlds away and days ago.

There *had* been someone... Another memory, an urgent memory, was surfacing through the fog that enshrouded the past hour of his life. He remembered a figure standing obdurately in front of him, attempting to bar his path. He had taken off his helmet and was yelling in Tarryn’s face, but Tarryn couldn’t make out what he was saying. ‘Brother Baeloch,’ he whispered.

He followed the telltale flicker of Decario’s eyes, to the armoured body in the undergrowth. His sickness had been subsiding, but now a fresh wave of it rolled over him. He tried to scramble towards the body, but he wasn’t yet strong enough and Decario had to steady him again.

‘Brother Baeloch is dead,’ said the Chief Librarian, not unkindly.

Tarryn felt numb. ‘I remember... He tried to stop me.’ *He was standing between me and my righteous vengeance, and I remember how angry that made me, so angry that I had to... I... I had the shard in my hand and I...*

‘He tried to make you drop the shard. I advised him that you, only you, could shake its influence over you. I told Baeloch to stand aside, but he was too stubborn to listen to me. He believed he was saving your soul.’

‘I killed him, didn’t I?’ said Tarryn. ‘I killed my brother.’

‘You saved my life, Brother Tarryn. Hold on to that. When I was at my weakest, it was you who kept the feral orks away from me. It was you who turned the power of the monolith against them, and fought them until no more remained to fight.’

I didn’t want to hurt him, thought Tarryn, but he wouldn’t get out of my way. Why wouldn’t he get out of my way?

‘Do you have the strength to stand?’ Decario asked him.

He wasn’t sure if he did, but he tried and with a little help, he succeeded. ‘The remainder of your company has returned to your base camp,’ said Decario. ‘Now that we have you, and the shard, we should hasten to join them. The Chapter Master has ordered that we leave Armageddon as quickly as possible.’

‘Leave?’ echoed Tarryn. ‘But the war—’

‘With the Emperor’s will, Warlord Ghazghkull will indeed be defeated. But our Chapter will play no further part in that victory. We have fulfilled our purpose on this world and have other wars to fight. He has chosen a different path for us.’

Two Relictors hoisted Baeloch’s body between them, and Tarryn felt a painful stab of guilt as they passed him. ‘I don’t even... I don’t know how the shard got into my hand. It was stuck in the side of the monolith.’

‘Perhaps my efforts loosened it, after all. Perhaps the violence of the battle vibrated it free. Perhaps it landed, unnoticed, among our brothers and was kicked along the base of the monolith to you. Perhaps that is how it happened.’

He was yelling in my face, the scream was pounding in my head and I just wanted him out of my way and the shard went straight through his breastplate and...

‘He was right,’ said Tarryn. ‘Baeloch was right. I couldn’t control it.’

‘I’d say you controlled it well enough,’ Decario assured him. ‘You saved your company today, and, in acquiring the shard where I failed, perhaps our entire Chapter.’

...and if Baeloch had lived, he would have gone to the Inquisition with what he knew and that would have been the end of the Relictors, so perhaps...

...perhaps, his death...

Bardane gave the order to move out, and Decario walked with Tarryn, ready to

support him should he need it. They were joined by Inquisitor Halstron. His bound daemonhost followed him, but his presence didn't bother Tarryn as it had. He was glad to see that the pale man was still a prisoner, that at least some links of his chains remained intact. The inquisitor regarded Tarryn for a moment, coolly. Then, much to his surprise, he favoured him with a small, approving nod.

The Emperor has chosen this path for me, he told himself, but whenever he closed his eyes, he saw the face of Baeloch, his brother, and heard his accusing voice: You are toying with forces you don't understand... Your mind has touched the warp and there is always a price for that... What if you have already succumbed?

'God-Emperor, forgive me,' Tarryn prayed.

Chief Librarian Decario looked at him in surprise, and then his lips twitched as if he were remembering some private joke and trying not to smile at it.

'There is nothing to forgive,' he said.

Priority level: Magenta Alpha

Transmitted: Adeptus Astartes battle-barge *Blade of Vengeance*

To: Master of the Administratum, Holy Terra

Date: 3031999.M41

Transmitter: Astropath Prime Galdorian

Receiver: Astropath-terminus Stranx

Author: Lord Commander Dante, Blood Angels Chapter Master

Thought for the Day: Knowledge is power – hide it well.

The Relictors Chapter has departed from Armageddon. I instructed the blockade to allow their Thunderhawks to pass. I take full responsibility for this decision. The only other option would have been a violent confrontation, which we can ill afford at present. I have repeatedly tried to contact Chapter Master Bardane, without success. I will prepare a fuller report for you in due course, and forward copies of all relevant communication log entries to you. We will need to discuss this matter at some length.



SIXTEEN

The stained-glass windows of the fortress-monastery had been shuttered.

It had generated a protective bubble about itself in preparation for being towed through warp space. It took the entire Relictors fleet to move the Ramilies-class star fort in this manner, and the journey was fraught with peril.

Decario, however, was confident that his Chapter would survive. The Emperor had chosen a path for them to follow, and this was not where it ended. Today, they had harnessed the power of Chaos again and lived to tell of it; this would be no different.

Once again, he followed a series of winding staircases to the lowest part of the sky fortress. He stood before a solid iron door. Once again, a battle-brother stood in front of the door beside him. This time, it was the newest and youngest member of his Chapter's secret Conclave.

Decario stood patiently in the light of the Vault's black candles, as Tarryn explored. His eyes drank in the diminished collection of relics, with a sense of wonder tempered by a healthy respect. He didn't need to be told that every artefact on display had been acquired at a price. He had already learned that lesson.

He lingered before the daemon-possessed dreadaxe, which Captain Harkus had wielded to such noteworthy effect on Armageddon. He examined the fragments of an ancient Chaos talisman, which Decario himself had unearthed on Pythenia and pieced together. He asked about the Artekus Scourge, and Decario showed him the gilded reliquary in which it had once again been frozen.

He halted, finally, by the carved pedestal in the centre of the room. He peered

through its dome at the two obsidian shards nestled in their bed of crushed velvet, and he asked about the third, the one he had taken from Angron's Monolith.

'I took it to the purifying chamber,' Decario explained. 'I have Librarians praying over the shard day and night, attempting to tame the daemon within it. They will bind it with powerful wards and seals to keep the daemon force contained.'

Tarryn nodded, sombrely. 'It was in my head, wasn't it? It smashed its way through my defences and it was screaming in my head, goading me until I lost myself to its rage. I don't even remember fighting it. I only know I did because you told me—'

'You didn't fight it,' Decario interrupted him. *Not like I tried to fight it, the first time.* 'Thank the Emperor for that mercy. Had you attempted to resist the shard's power, it is likely your mind would have snapped.'

Tarryn stared at him, uncomprehendingly. That hadn't been what he had expected to hear. 'You are young,' the Chief Librarian explained, 'still trusting, still innocent. Your faith in the Emperor is absolute – and that, nothing else, is what saved you. The power of Chaos flooded into your mind, but it could find no foothold there.'

'I am no longer innocent.' Tarryn glared at Decario again, as if defying him to disagree. It had been a day and a half since Decario had sat across from him, in a shuttle in a clearing in the heart of an alien jungle, and his eyes had been bright and clear and open, then. He appeared much older in the candlelight, today.

Decario wouldn't lie to him. *Not again.* 'The shard has left its mark on you, on your soul, and nothing can be done to erase it, as I know only too well,' he confirmed. 'However, I can teach you rituals and prayers that will enable you to know that part of yourself and find strength in it. I can teach you how to wield the tools of Chaos – that is, should you choose to tread this most treacherous of paths alongside me.'

'The Emperor has chosen my path for me,' declared Tarryn, without a moment's hesitation, 'and I will do as He wills me.'

No matter where it might ultimately lead you? Decario wondered, but he didn't give voice to the words.

He thought about the tense events of the previous night. Bardane had summoned the Chapter's fleet of Thunderhawks to the Armageddon jungle. It had taken two trips to evacuate the Relictors. The Fourth Company had been slow to reassemble and so had been in the second group to board, along with

Decario and the Chapter Master himself. The Imperial Navy had let their ships pass once, but not a second time.

Bardane had claimed to have urgent Chapter business, and demanded that the battleships in his way stand down. The lord admiral in command of the blockade had declined and insisted that the Relictors return to the planet and do their duty. Any problems, he had said, should be taken up with Lord Commander Dante.

Bardane had replied that if the blockade didn't part for him, he would punch a hole through it. He was badly outgunned, but he was counting on the fact that no one wanted a fight, not here and not now.

The standoff had lasted four hours, during which time Bardane's resolve had never wavered, at least not visibly. Decario could only wish for half his confidence. Bardane had known this day would come, however, and had long since prepared himself to face it. In the end, his instincts had been proven correct. Dante himself had intervened in the dispute, and – after his overtures to his fellow Chapter Master had been ignored – he had had the blockade ships stand down.

He wouldn't let the matter rest there; of that, there was not the slightest doubt.

Decario thought about the final battle too, around the monolith. He thought about Tarryn in the grip of a berserker rage, determined to hunt down every last feral ork and slay them. And he thought about Baeloch, struggling in vain to stop him.

Decario had warned him that Tarryn was beyond all reason. He had still been weak from his own attempt to take the shard. He could have done more, all the same. He had even taken a step forwards, intending to intervene physically, but he had felt a heavy, restraining hand on his shoulder. Artekus Bardane hadn't spoken, but the message in his eyes had been perfectly clear.

And what was one more stain on Decario's soul, after all?

'Sir, what about the monolith?' Tarryn's voice brought him back to the present, to the Vault. 'If I may ask?'

'Ought we to destroy it? Perhaps,' Decario mused. 'I would have preferred to examine it, had there only been more time – for who knows what other secrets it might reveal to us. Perhaps, once the war for Armageddon is over...'

That, he thought, and the greater war to come, should any of us survive it.

Tarryn nodded, as if he understood. Maybe, thought Decario, one day he truly would. For now, however, he dismissed the young Relictor, with a promise that his training would begin in earnest tomorrow. Tarryn snapped to attention and saluted before he left. Decario listened to the metallic echoes of his footsteps, as

he climbed the steps back to the fortress's main levels.

He was left alone, finally, with his thoughts.

Inevitably, those thoughts drifted back to the Stygies System, a hundred and fifty years ago. Decario was back in the *Captor of Sin*'s engine room, in his Fire Claws colours, with the Excoriator's sword lying next to his outstretched fingers.

Would I have grasped the sword, he wondered, had I been able to see the future?

He thought about Inquisitor de Marche. His calming voice had been the lifeline that had guided him back to sanity. He remembered the inquisitor in chains, his head stooped as he was led away to an ignominious death. *Did he know? Had he already seen, on the space hulk, where the path he had chosen to tread must lead?*

Could he have warned me? Would it have changed anything if he had?

He thought about Bardane, and the path along which he had guided him. He thought about the inevitable consequences yet to be faced. He thought about Tarryn, and the path that stretched before him – and even about Baeloch, a sacrifice to the Xanthite cause, and not the first.

The Xanthite cause...

Those were de Marche's words again, he realised.

Decario had never thought of himself as having a *cause*. He had never identified with those shadowy daemon hunters, congregating in their underground temples, cloaked in their dark secrets. He had always simply done what he knew to be right. He had based the choices he had made throughout his life on necessity and unassailable logic, and he wouldn't remake a single one of them now if he could.

He had had the vision again.

It had happened while he had been aboard the Thunderhawk, awaiting the fateful outcome of his Chapter Master's gamble. The bleeding eye had appeared to him more vividly than ever. He had felt as if he could fall into it, and had known that, if he did, he would never be able to climb free. He had clutched at the chest that contained the shard, for strength. *I am doing the best I can*, he had promised. *We shall be ready.*

His choices had been the right ones. Decario was sure of that, more so now than he had ever been. *The Emperor knows I have wished it were not so often enough.* He was following the path that the Emperor had chosen for him.

A century and a half ago, his questing fingers had reached for a fallen weapon. Had he not taken up the daemon blade then, he would certainly have died.

His brother Fire Claws, however, would doubtless have avenged him, and the tale of that battle would have been a glorious page in their history, not a shameful one. They would not have had their name and colours stripped from them, nor had to endure their banishment from Neutra, the birthplace of their ancestors.

Inquisitor de Marche might have enjoyed a kinder fate, while certainly Artekus Bardane – without a doubt the noblest warrior that Decario had ever had the honour to serve with – would not now stand accused as a heretic.

He couldn't count the number of Space Marines, like Tarryn and Baeloch, who would have served the Emperor faithfully, and never questioned the manner of that service. They wouldn't have risked their souls, and Decario's soul would have remained untarnished too. He would have died without regrets, in blessed ignorance.

And the Holy Imperium of Man would have been doomed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Lyons's work in the Warhammer 40,000 universe includes the novellas *Engines of War* and *Angron's Monolith*, the Imperial Guard novels *Ice World* and *Dead Men Walking* – now collected in the omnibus *Honour Imperialis* – and the audio dramas *Waiting Death* and *The Madness Within*. He has also written numerous short stories and is currently working on more tales from the grim darkness of the far future.

Trapped in an overturned tank after being caught in a bombing run on Armageddon, Commissar Sebastian Yarrick fights to escape and return to his forces.



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